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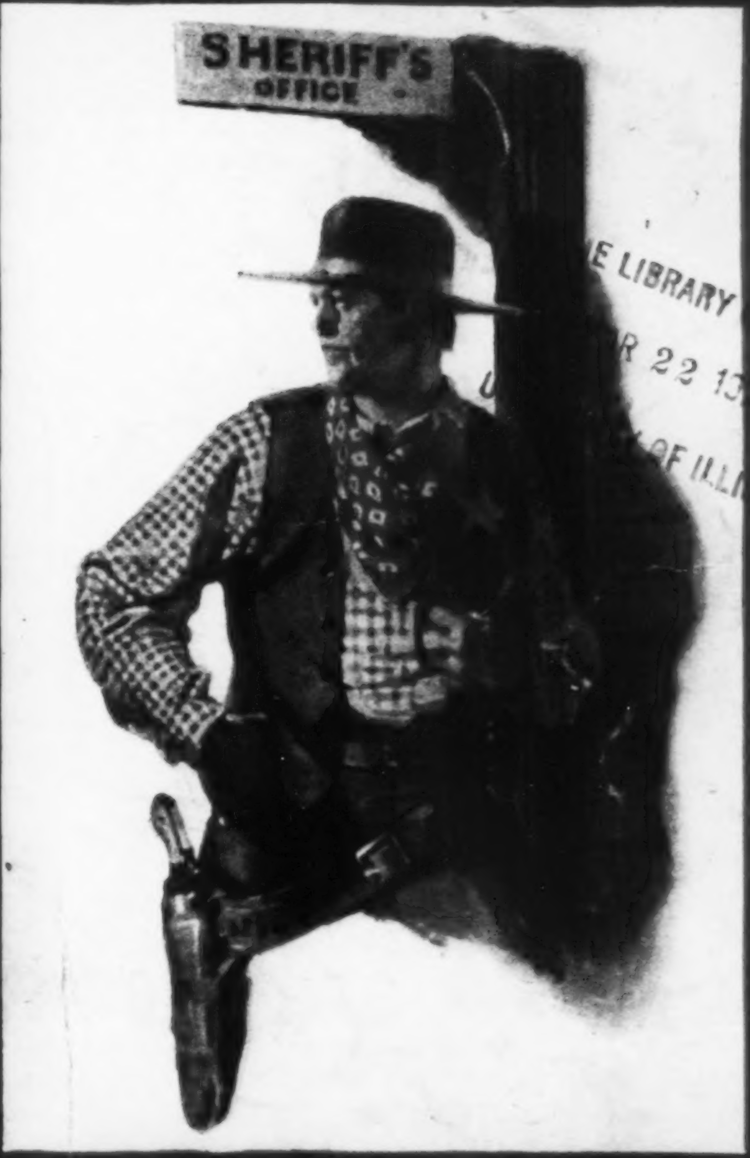

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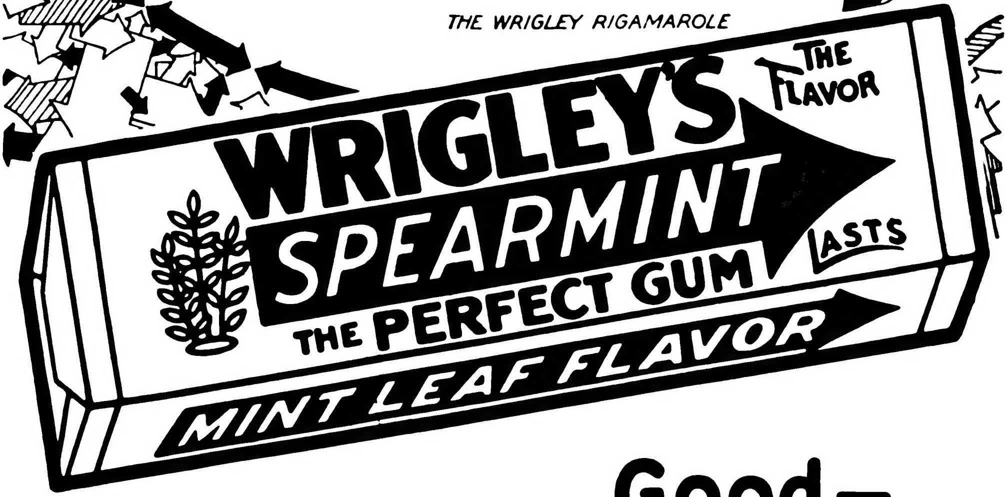
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April, 1928
Vol. LVIII No. 4

Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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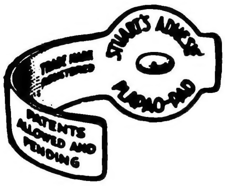

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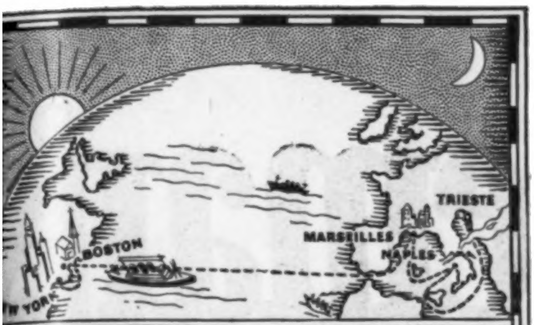

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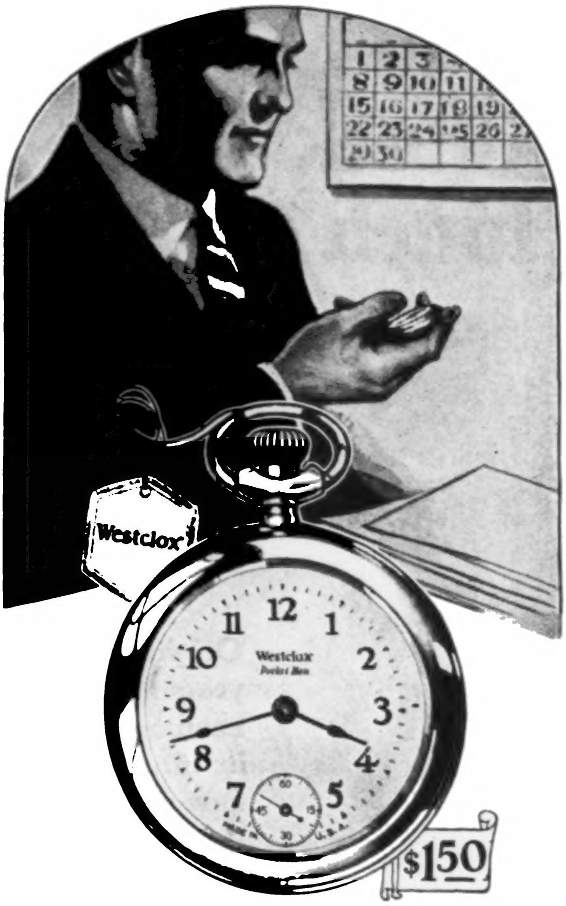

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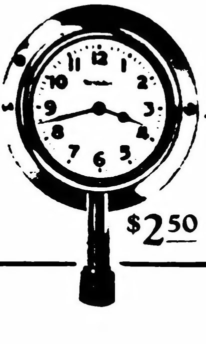

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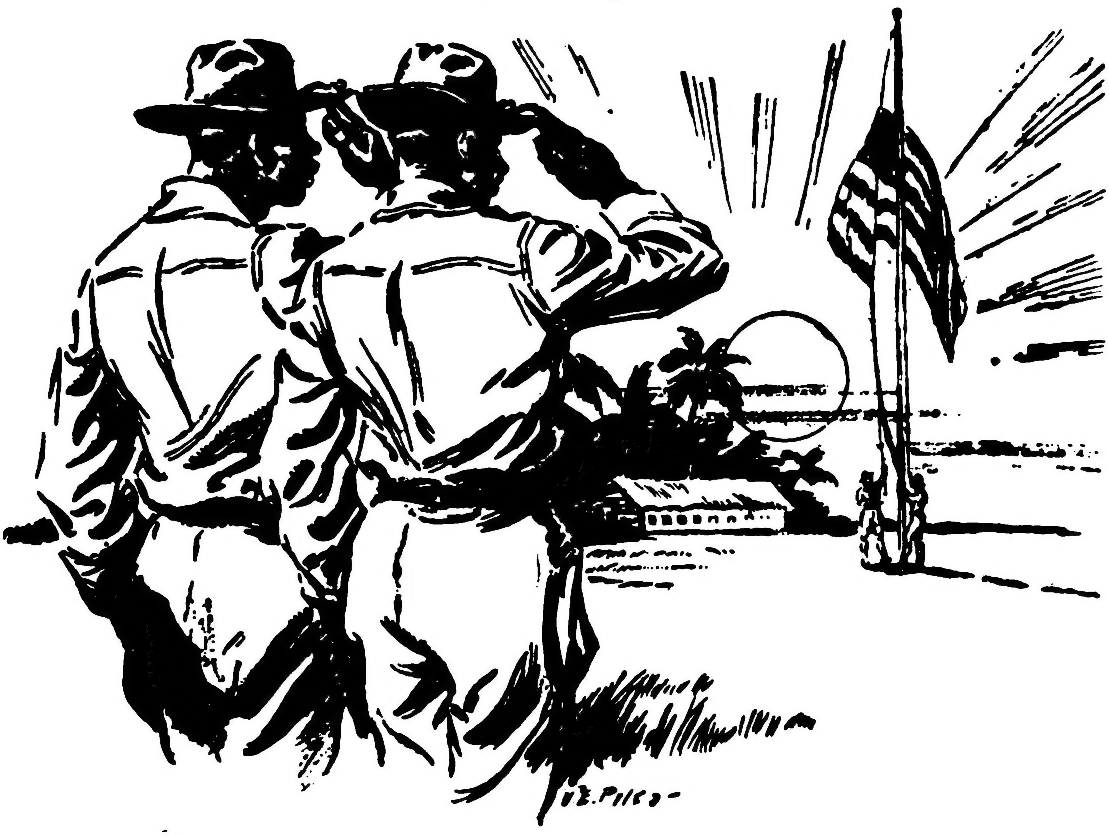


A Tale of the Philippines and the Heart of a Soldier

TO THE COLORS

By ARED WHITE

"SHAME on yo', Sahgent Johnson. Shame on yo' leadin' dem pore dark chillun straight to de debbil—'stead ob helpin' me an Cop'ral Boon sabe dem fo' de Lawd!"

Reverend George Washington Waite, itinerant evangelist who lately had swooped down upon the colored section of the garrison to save the cavalry from perdition, pointed a trembling fat finger accusingly at lean old Master Sergeant Eben Johnson who sat sprawled in lazy unconcern in front of the vine-bowered porch of the regimental canteen.

"Trouble is, Pahson," drawled Sergeant Johnson, "yo' don't know them Toms an' Tabbies like Ah does. Ah's been keepin' them black chil'ren out of the clutches of the devil evah since befo' they was growed up."

Reverend Mr. Waite's temperature rose. He pounded one hand with the other in emphasis as he launched into his righteous rebuke.

"Yo' bin teachin' dem chillun de ways ob war, Sahgent Johnson," he expostulated, "and war's powerful wicked."

The old sergeant suppressed a yawn. He was wearied of this daily intrusion upon his late afternoon reverie—this sacred hour when the day's heartbreaking work was done and the old regiment lived again in the minds of the old non-coms as they sat staring silently into the gathering dusk.

"Ah reckons yo' is right, Pahson," he agreed without looking up. "An' Ah reckons what's more that Ah is goin' to keep on sittin' right here—an' that's that, Mistah Pahson."

The evangelist, fired by the holiness of his mission and the generosity to the contribution plate of such few cavalrymen converts as he had been able to make, did not give up.

"Shame on yo' Sahgent Eben Johnson," broke forth Reverend Mr. Waite in a sort of frenzied singsong. "Shame on you Sahgent. Yo' sitting heah in sin." He pointed his fat finger at an approaching group of troopers and their wenches. "Yo' sittin' heah in sin and Cop'ral Boon leadin' de ahmy ob de Lawd to salvation—wid only a han'ful comin' w'en dey should be a whole ahmy!"

Sergeant Johnson made no reply as his eyes thoughtfully followed the tall figure across the regimental street. Corporal Abraham Lincoln Boon, in civilian attire, leading forty troopers and their women towards the post chapel, colored, for basket picnic and revival services. Corporal Boon walked with slow dignity, a dignity that went well with the Prince Albert and high silk hat, and the gold-headed cane in his hand. On his arm was a thin, somber woman, of coppery hue rather than black or yellow, and with large coal-black eyes that looked out peacefully from almond slits. Her hair was straight and black and her gait was a queer, easy sort of glide that somehow suggested stealth.

"Ef dey was a Sistah Johnson, mebbe Ah could reason wid her," Reverend Mr. Waite observed mournfully as he watched the procession of converts. "It was Sistah Boon done brung Abraham to de fold, Sahgent Johnson. Fo' why ain't dey no Sistah Johnson? De Good Book hit says it ain't good fo' no man to lib widout a good Christen woman in de house."

"Wimmin?" echoed Sergeant Johnson, animation in his patient voice for the first time. "Ah's always suspected it was them heathen wimmin brung this proud body of fightin' men to this sad state you sees it in."

Reverend Mr. Waite's emotional face clouded wrathfully at this sinful and unmanly thrust. "Shame on yo,' Sahgent Johnson!" he said hotly. "Hit's sinful befo' de Lawd fo' yo' to defame de good name ob Christen wimmin! Apol'gize, Sahgent Johnson, fo' yo' rema'ks 'bout them Christen cullud folks, befo' yo' awakes de anger ob de Lawd!"

"Ah got nothin' to apologize fo'," said Sergeant Johnson, firmly. "Them wimmin ain't cullud folks, Pahson. They's Igorotes, Moros, Malays—they's among 'em folks that has et on the bones of evang'lists like yo', Pahson. Sistah Boon claims she's the descend'nt of a dato—a heathen Moro, Pahson."

"Yo' means to say dem——"

"Ah says befo', Pahson, yo' don't know them Toms an' Tabbies like Ah does." The sergeant went on quietly. "They's tame enough today—but Ah has 'em to handle in them days when they has long, sharp claws—and Ah has to save 'em from the devil. Don't we have the fightenest reg'ment in all the Ahmy 'fo' we land in Mindanao?" Sergeant Johnson demanded as if stirred suddenly by bitter memories. "Don't we put the fear of Gawd into them Moros aftah they bolo'd an' buffalo'd the bes' white sojers? Then them cullud chil'ren done turns f'm fightin' heathen men to marryin' heathen wimmin—an' now heah we is!"

Sergeant Johnson fell back again into dismal silence. Reverend Mr. Waite reflected upon the disclosure for some moments as he observed the procession on the cinder path with wide eyes and open mouth. Then the spirit of his mission moved him back to his holy calling.

"All de moah shame on yo', Sahgent Johnson," he rejoined artfully. "All de moah shame on yo'. Dem heathen wimmin come to de Lawd an' you', borned a Christen, is walkin' straight to de debbil."

THE old regimental sergeant held his peace. The hour of retreat was approaching as the sun slipped low in the west. It was the hour he gave over to his thoughts. It was the hour when the old regiment lived again in his mind as a dashing, flashing thing of horse and steel: riding the sandy wastes of the borderlands; stalking treacherous Malay warriors in the bamboo jungles of distant Mindanao.

These days, during working hours, it was a mere work outfit, the proud old regiment. Reduced by some strange whim of the white man's war department to a boot-shining, belt-polishing, furnace-tending service for haughty white officers at the Army schools learning the art of war from books and wall maps. The old regiment's horses were gone, and its troop and squadron formations, and the endless stirring rumors of a new call for hard duty in the tropics or along the sand-tossed border country.

Here it stayed, at this school, doing menial jobs, suffering dumbly and sustained only by the glory of its past. Only in the gathering shadows of dusk, the day's work done, did the regiment mount up and dash away again to the mad beating of hoofs that echoed in old men's minds as they sat rubbing the scars of ancient wounds and lived over the days that were never to be again.

"Atten-shun!"

The reverberating boom of the sunset gun broke over the garrison. The field music hurtled the staccato notes of "To the Colors" into the air. Sergeant Eben Johnson fairly crashed out of his indolent pose and was on his feet in a twinkling, stiff as a ramrod, right hand held smartly to the visor of his cap, eyes fixed upon the lowering colors.

"Off with that hat, niggah!" he commanded the evangelist sharply. "Get them heels togethah an' stand respectful like a Christen gen'man!"

Reverend Mr. Waite, wondering what it was about, hesitated an instant. Then his hat came off as he saw the procession across on the cinder path become awed statues. Corporal Boon's high silk hat was in his left hand, over his heart, while his right hand touched his shiny black forehead respectfully. Sister Boon stood with her coppery chin held high, her jet hair glistening in the last rays of the sun, watching the graceful descent of the Stars and Stripes from the garrison flagpole.

Even after the last caressing note of "To the Colors", the troopers and their women stood looking at the empty parade grounds as if reluctant to depart. From across the way, Reverend Mr. Waite caught the glitter of unfathomable moisture just under Corporal Boon's eyes. Sergeant Johnson saluted smartly to the front and turned back to the evangelist, his manner now suddenly vitalized.

"Pahson Waite," he said fervently, "there am mo' good religion for them cullud folks in the notes of them bugles dan in all the prayin' an' rantin' yo' been doin' among them chil'ren this past month."

Reverend Waite reflected upon this affront to his calling with gathering scorn. His nimble wits had been analyzing this whole strange exhibition and framing a fresh attack on the stubborn citadel of Eben's ungodliness.

"De Good Book says it am downright sinful," he retorted, breaking into his impressive spiritual singsong, "fo' mo'tal man to bow down befo' brass images—an' what am dem bugles but brass, Sahgent Johnson!" His face glowed at the biblical trap in which he had enmeshed the wicked sergeant.

"Ah says," Eben replied with severity, "Ah says if it ain't been fo' them bugles an' that flag, some of them Tabbies'd be eatin' dog an' missionary folks like yo' right today down in Mindanao."

"Shame, Sahgent Eben Johnson!" Reverend Mr. Waite rebuked him again. "Yo' ought be leadin' the ahmy ob de Lawd 'stead ob standin' roun' talkin' sacrilig'ousness, claimin' fo' dem unchristen brass bugles de glory of de Lawd w'en——"

"Lissen, niggah!" Eben broke in glowering upon Reverend Mr. Waite in sudden passion. "Yo's castin' stigmatisms on mah religion when yo' done talk ag'in them bugles."

Reverend Waite threw up a defensive arm and shrunk back as in sudden fear of physical violence. A placating apology rose to his lips.

"Ah respects yo' perfession, Mistah Pahson," Eben reassured him. "Fo' two hours yo' bin talkin' 'bout yo' bran' of religion—two hours every day fo' a week. Now yo's sittin' right down there an bein' still while Ah tells yo' all 'bout them Toms an' them Tabbies—an' 'bout them brass bugles."

Eben half forced the uneasy parson into the big chair and subdued him to silence with difficulty. The parson had a gift of gab that it was difficult for him to hold in check. It was not his normal rôle to listen.

"Yo' keeps quiet," Eben warned him. "Ah's defendin' mah religion an when Ah's done finished yo' can use yo' own judgment about abusin' them brass bugles."

Eben lighted a black manila rope and, as he accomplished the final silence of Evangelist Waite, sank back into the reminiscent mood that had been his each night here in front of the canteen as the shadows gathered.

THE old —th United States Cavalry, colored, suddenly ceased to be a boot-polishing, furnace-tending outfit at a white officers' service school, as Eben's voice droned on, or rose and fell, softly, pulsating with feeling. It stalked fiery jungles again, subduing savage bolo and Mauser-bearing Moros, suppressing the red insurrections of desperate datos—carrying the Stars and Stripes into the deep, dark places of the Philippine archipelago where death and treachery stalked hand in hand along the uncharted foot-trails or lurked in the heavy bamboo thickets and thick cogon of the trackless Moro lands. It had been a dangerous, glorious time.

There had come then to the regiment a long lull in the guerrilla bushwhacking with Moro tribesmen who at first had fought desperately against the invasion of their domain. The staunchest bolomen no longer stood up to fight those strange black giants who wore white men's livery and rode huge fiery chargers—horses the size of an elephant compared with the tiny Island ponies of the datos' herds.

B Troop was established in the vicinity of a Moro village where it lay through months of alert inaction. Reconnoitering patrols no longer were molested and it was considered safe now for double squads, under arms, to go to the restless Sarangani, an hour's march to the south, for a dip in its cooling blue waters.

There were rumors in the air of a holy war—a sudden gathering of Moros, goaded by their Mohammedan priests, to drive the invaders back into Luzon in one frenzied massed attack with Mauser, kris and bolo. But trusted spies brought word that there had been no exodus of fighting men from the villages. Not until the warriors began slipping from the villages at the call of the bamboo signal drums need the invaders do more than hold themselves in readiness for a sudden attack. And after long weeks of this tension the invading force had settled down into a mere army of occupation, governed by a policy of watchful waiting.

But with the long lull in operations had come a new and serious problem for those who commanded squads—a responsibility that fell right on the shoulders of the non-commissioned officers. Slowly but surely the ebony troopers were turning from thoughts of mortal combat with Moro warriors to equally compelling dreams of love with the Moro maidens. Such a thing could only heap fuel on the flames since it added to the sullen bitterness of the Moro youths. They found themselves as little matched against these hulking black beaus from the Northlands, in the game of love as in the game of war. Not even threat of death kept their striped sarongs over the faces of Moro maidens when the prying black Lotharios from across the seas came upon them beyond the villages.

Corporal Eben Johnson of B Troop was hard hit by this new plague. He had noted with growing uneasiness that the affections of three of his troopers had strayed from their horses and their duties as soldiers to copper-hued renegade Moro maids of low caste, who came from the Moro village with the fruit of the papaw and coconuts for sale among the soldiers. The seriousness of his problem deepened when word seeped through from Luzon that intermarriages with the natives of Luzon were being permitted now in the service, in cases of dependable soldiers who were provident enough to support a native wife.

Then, when a fourth member of his squad was seized suddenly and violently by this new heart affliction, Corporal Eben Johnson was in despair. Three out of his squad of eight was dangerous. Four—fifty per cent of his command—it was unthinkable. It might give the troop commander the notion that Corporal Eben Johnson was not maintaining exactly the right sort of discipline. One dire result would be sure to follow—the snipping off of Corporal Eben's hard-earned chevrons.

When three of his troopers came in a body to feel him out on the subject of marriage, the corporal talked to them with patient logic, pointing out the mad folly of such a union. He was rejoicing in the fact that they had seemed to see the light when the fourth trooper came in—Private Abraham Lincoln Boon.

"Cop'ral, sah—Ah wants permission to get married!" Private Boon announced, unabashed, and with no equivocation in his manner.

"Abraham Boon, yo' run on 'way from heah an' polish yo' horse. An' don' come 'round here with no more crazy foolishness," the corporal scoffed good-humoredly, in an effort to pass the incident off as too trifling for serious consideration.

Private Boon stood with his eyes fixed

soberly on the corporal, in the manner of a man who has made up his mind.

"Cop'ral Johnson, sah, Ah's done made up mah mine to marry—an' Ah wants yo' permission to ask de cap'n's permission. Ah's got mah month's pay sabed."

"Yo' quit bein' a sojer, Private Boon?" the corporal demanded, turning on the aspiring bridegroom with sudden high humor. "Yo' turnin' Moham'den an' taken on one of them heathen wenches from Genassi's harem? How yo' know, Private Boon, that that gal won't put yo' bones in the kettle some night w'en yo's sleepin' an' have yo' served fo' breakfas'!"

Private Boon glowered sullenly. "Cop'ral Eben Johnson—mah Abilene's de descendunt ob de Dato Ali—she's a lot better dan all de black trash like yo' in de world!" he roared.

"Don' yo' talk back to me, niggah. Ah wouldn't trus' one of them bone-suckin' cannibals ten feet. An' yo' Abilene—as yo' calls her—she ain't no bettah'n the rest. Out of here, niggah!"

Corporal Johnson was stirred to fighting humor by the show of disrespect—almost insubordination—from the love-maddened trooper of his squad. He pointed a wrathful finger in the direction of the picket line.

"Yo' takes dat insults to mah Abilene back, Cop'ral Johnson, or by Gawd Ah'll——"

Private Boon whipped his revolver from its holster and stood glaring with murder in his black eyes as he pulled back the hammer. Corporal Johnson gathered himself for a swift spring at the other's throat. There was no backing down even in the face of almost certain death before this——

The reverberating boom of the sunset gun broke over the little garrison. The field music sent the staccato notes of "To the Colors" into the air as the Stars and Stripes came majestically down from the peak of the bamboo flagstaff in the center of camp.

"Atten-shun!"

Corporal Eben Johnson snapped erect in a twinkling, stiff as a ramrod, right hand rising to the visor of his campaign hat, eyes fixed reverently on the lowering colors. Private Abraham Lincoln Boon's humor changed with almost equal swiftness. The weapon went clattering to the ground as he raised his right hand to salute. He stood rigidly through the ceremony of the lowering flag, his blood slowly rising to the thrill of the bugles as they sounded their caressing lullaby to the Stars and Stripes. Abilene became a dream thing, a million leagues away, swept aside by the glorious anthem of the soldier whose magic stirs the blood of strong men strangely and strips their souls of weak passions.

THE two troopers stood looking for a moment at the empty flagstaff as the last note of "To the Colors" faded and the flag was tenderly folded and carried inside the camp headquarters tent for the night. They turned to face each other at the same moment. Private Boon's hand rose to the brim of his campaign hat again.

"Ah wants to apol'gize, Cop'ral Johnson," he said. "Ah done loss mah head—an' Ah's sorry. Ah repo'ts, sah, under a'rest."

The corporal stood looking at him a long time in silent reproach.

"Ah's brung yo' up f'm a pore Alabam' niggah, Private Boon," replied Corporal Johnson. "Ah's glad yo's come back into yo' right senses. That's all, Abraham. Ah'm not goin' to repo't yo' in arrest."

"Thank yo', suh, Cop'ral Johnson, suh," said Private Boon.

As soon as mess was over Corporal Johnson went to the first sergeant's tent. He had heard there was a security patrol of two squads going out for duty on the bank of the bay. Its mission was to keep in observation skulking shadows, that had been sighted in the cogon among the mangoes and palms, elusive skulkers who acted as if they might be lying in wait for stragglers from the swimming parties. The corporal asked for this detail. It was given to him promptly by the puzzled top-sergeant, who wondered why any sane soldier should want a detail of such isolation with its requirement of fretful vigilance.

But if Corporal Eben Johnson had any idea that a few days of detached duty five miles from camp would restore his afflicted troopers to normal usefulness as soldiers, his hopes got a rude shock the first evening of arrival at the Sarangani. The bivouac outpost was little more than established than Corporal Johnson caught a glimpse of bronzed bare legs under striped sarong. He looked up to see a Moro woman lounging expectantly under a yellow bancal tree just beyond the bivouac area. He recognized Private Boon's Abilene, the almond-eyed renegade descendant of a Malay pirate.

The next afternoon she was back again, and with her now the three other Moro maidens who were the inspiration of Eben's request for duty away from the vicinity of the village. The distance back and forth each day was nothing more for them than it would be for a fleet-footed timarau. The corporal lined his men up and gave them their orders.

"We all's out heah fo' duty an' not on no love-makin' exp'dition," he jeered them. "Ah'll put in arrest the fust man what's foun' talkin' with a female woman when on duty. When off duty—they ain't nobody 'lowed mo than fifty yahds f'm this bivwack. That's all!"

The same ingenuity that enables lovers to scoff at locksmiths in civilized countries made light of Corporal Johnson's drastic orders. The Moro maids came when their men were off duty, and since the troopers could not stroll with them among the palms and tree ferns, they came boldly into camp and sat just outside the pup tents until the hour of taps.

The soft, cooling breezes off the emerald bahia, the romantic setting of stately palms and graceful bancals, banked in heavy black masses under the ghostly glow of the billion incandescents above, the eerie calling of strange fowls in the jungle mingling with the chatter of red-beaked habla birds combined in an irresistible setting. Corporal Johnson could not have defeated his own purposes more completely had he brewed a love potion for his ailing swains. Private Abraham Boon appeared before him again before mid-week.

"Ah's come, Cop'ral Johnson, to ask yo' help in gettin' p'mission fo' to get hitched up wid mah Abilene," he said.

Private Boon was respectful but very much in earnest this time. If he went about his mission less bluntly than before, he was not the less determined. Corporal Johnson did not run any risk on stirring him into another mad frenzy this time.

"Ah's sorry, Private Boon," he said in an abrupt official way. "Ah's moughty sorry yo's ackin' like this—but Ah'll do mah duty. Ah'll ask the fust sahgent fo' p'mishun fo' yo' to ask the cap'n. An' may the Lawd have mercy on yo' soul."

"Ah thanks yo', Cop'ral Johnson," replied Private Boon, saluting his gratitude and walking back to his shelter tent where the Moro chieftain's bare-legged descendant was waiting for him, squatted anxiously on the ground outside his tent.

When the three other lovelorn troopers came, one at a time, to win their squad leader's approval, Corporal Johnson met each in turn with a swiftly rising temperature. They were less-stubborn darkies than Private Boon and they slipped with quaking knees away from the stormy Corporal Johnson. He smiled in satisfaction at their easy rout. One trooper out of his squad to approach the troop commander for marriage permission would not be a ruinous average.

Ten minutes after relief squads came from the B Troop camp at the end of the week, Corporal Johnson was on the trail with his troopers, marching away from the romantic shores of the bay as he would hurry away from pestilence. Another week there—and he was not certain that discipline would hold even those timid three in line. It was no place down there for susceptible, weak black troopers. Back at camp he could give those three sick troopers plenty of extra duty on the picket line to help nurse them into usefulness, if not forgetfulness. As for Private Boon—Well it would be for the skipper to put that obdurate black person in his place. Or, if he permitted Private Boon to marry a renegade Moro, perhaps a few weeks of that strange adventure would restore poor Boon to his proper senses.

"This ain't no time fo' nobody to be bodderin' de skippah wid no 'quests for gittin' spliced wid no Mohammedan Moro gals," the top-sergeant advised Corporal Johnson, shaking his head in sober warning. "Not wid no r'ligion wahs blowin' up!"

"That niggah's got it bad an' he's jus' never goin' be happy without talkin' it ovah with the cap'n," Corporal Johnson insisted.

"Den lead um right up an' let um get wot's comin' to um," said the first sergeant. "P'misshun granted fo' Private Abraham Lincoln Boon to speak wid the cap'n—an' may the Lawd protect um!"

Private Boon did not go at once to the troop commander's quarters when he got the word that the first sergeant had granted permission for him to speak to the commanding officer. Half a dozen times he passed by the captain's tent, but each time his heart failed him at the last moment.

TROOP B was commanded by a soldier of the old school. He was a product of the ancient Teuton military axiom that subordinates need fear their commanders far more than they fear the enemy. There was not a trooper in the whole outfit who would not rather face a platoon of bolomen in the bamboos than be called into the presence of Captain Banton for troop discipline.

It was no secret among the squads that this Moro land incursion, with its isolation from white men and civilization, had not improved his temper. There were those who said he prayed nightly for the breaking forth of a Mohammedan holy war against his troop, simply to break the recent deadly monotony of lying there listening to rumors with nothing on his mind but troop routine.

"Ef dat cap'n eber prays it shore am to de debbil and not to de Lawd," one trooper whispered, when the report was bandied about among the squads.

Captain Banton's humor had not been in any measure placated by the soothing melody of Christian chimes in the Spanish mission at the edge of the Moro village. Those chimes rang, even though there were no converts, each morning an hour before reveille, disturbing what rest the captain was able to get in that black man's hellhole. Failing to get relief by remonstrance, he had sent half a dozen different details to the mission with orders to cut the bell from its rope in the belfry. But the old Spanish priest, whose unbelievable craft had outridden Mohammedan fanaticism for a quarter of a century, drove the superstitious colored troopers back from his chapel before his crucifix each time they came.

The captain, goaded to a passion by this weakness of his men and his own impotence in dealing with them since it was not a lawful order they had disobeyed, swore he would put them to shame by suppressing the nuisance with his own hands. Only the morning preceding he had leaped from his bed and rushed to the chapel, saber in hand, to be subdued himself by the old Spaniard. They compromised. The chimes would be rung thereafter only at the hour of reveille. Thus the matter was amicably adjusted—but there was deep bitterness yet in the captain's breast that his men had failed him.

It was the morning after this that Private Boon finally steeled himself to beard the captain in his quarters. His mind made up, he marched in with a brave air and began stammering out his mission the minute he came before his troop commander.

"Sah, Private Boon has de fust sahgent's p'misshun to speak wid de troop commandah, sah!"

"Then speak!" The captain's voice was as sharp as a bolo blade.

"Sah, Private Boon axes de troop commandah's p'misshun to take to umself a wife, sah!"

"A wife!" snapped the captain with narrowing eyes. "What have you found to marry down here—a chimpanzee or a she orang-outang?"

"De d'cendent ob de Moro dato, Ali, sah. Ah's got a month's pay sabed fo' de——"

"Private Boon are you drunk on bino! You don't really mean to stand there and tell me you want to marry one of them betel-nut-chewing, flea-bitten savages that the Moros have kicked out, do you?"

"Yes, sah, Cap'n. Ah's real in earnes' tellin' yo' wot Ah wants. Ah ain't drunk no bino, sah."

The captain stood up and thrust his finger at the door of his nipa hut. "Get out of here, Private Boon, and don't ever let me hear anything further about this damn nonsense!" the captain raged.

"Sah—Ah wants to say—" Private Boon held his place at respectful attention before his troop commander.

"Did you hear my order!" broke in the captain savagely. "Get out of here before I put you in arrest for insubordinate conduct!"

"Yas, sah."

Private Boon saluted smartly, executed about face, and marched out into the aching void.

IT WAS a sullen, brooding trooper that wandered into his squad tent to prepare for formation an hour later. Corporal Jöhnson got no word of reply to his cheery greeting. When Abraham's staring eyes and drooping jaw had not mended by the end of the week, the corporal became alarmed. Private Boon disappeared into the cogon beyond the edge of camp each evening the moment he was off duty. Not until "Call to Quarters" would he return and then never with any improvement in his desperate mood. The corporal cautiously set a trusted trooper to watch him. Experience had taught him the symptoms that precede possible desertion. There was no taking chances of losing a member of his squad in any such disgraceful fashion. Least of all his protégé from Alabama, Private Abrahám Lincoln Boon, whose enlistment he had vouched for in the first place.

"Call to Quarters" that very night brought Corporal Eben's secret emissary into his tent, gasping incoherently in his excitement.

"Ah done heers it, Cop'ral," he panted when he got control of his words. "Ah done sees Troopah Boon d'sert."

Corporal Johnson clapped his hand over the trooper's mouth to quiet him.

"Yo' don' goin' to waken the whole camp with yo' noise," he cautioned him. "Ain't yo' got no pride in yo' squad, niggah? Now yo' tell me quiet just what yo' talkin' 'bout."

"Cop'ral, I sneaks right up on dat narra tree an' heers it all. Dat yaller heathen gal done gets Private Boon go way wid her. She tells him he be big chief wid dem Moro people. She tells him dey jus' wants a big black man laik him fo' to follow. Cop'ral yo' neber heers such dreams as dat gal has! And widout no word, off goes Private Boon wid her—done gone turn Moham'den."

Corporal Johnson arose grimly and went straight to Private Boon's tent. The empty bunk bore grim testimony to Abraham's absence without leave. The corporal slipped back into his own tent despairingly.

"Ah's thinkin' mebbe Abraham's just gone off fo' a walk with that gal," he said reassuringly. "Anyhow he ain't no desertah 'till aftah ten days. It may of been Abraham's been grabbed by them Moros an' they's holdin' him prisoner. So don't yo' go shootin' off yo' mouth, niggah! Don' yo' go disgracin' this heah squad befo' we knows fo' sure!"

Patrols were sent in search of the missing trooper at reveille. Double squads searched the stilted nipa huts of the village. There was no trace of the missing trooper to be found. Only one significant fact was developed to shape suspicion that he had gone off voluntarily rather than as a captive. The Moro girl he called Abilene was also missing from her nipa hut in the village. That they had allowed her to go unharmed hinted strongly of some cunning Moro conspiracy.

"Ah's thinkin' Private Boon's been done foul," Corporal Johnson protested to the first sergeant. The corporal meant to shield the good name of his squad to the last ditch. There was yet in his mind the hope that Private Boon would show up, or his body be found with the mark of a bolo on it, certain proof of an honorable end.

Search patrols were shortly drawn in and the mystery of Private Boon's disappearance laid aside before the stir of new and vivid rumors of an impending holy war against the hated Christian invaders. Spies from the village brought word that young warriors were slipping by twos and threes into the forests and massing as for the launching of a surprise attack. Bamboo signal drums in the distant hills lent substance to the feeling of impending trouble.

All doubt that Moro mischief was in the air disappeared when a fusillade of shots came whistling into the American camp at midnight. Corporal Johnson's heart turned cold as he caught one telltale note in the uncanny whistling in the air overhead. His keen ear singled out unmistakably the shrill pinging note of a Krag amid the deeper-throated song of the Mausers.

The disturbance was a mere annoying flurry which was not repeated as Troop B, called to arms by the shrieking trumpets, sat staring into the empty blackness until daybreak. Heavy reconnoissance patrols into the village and through the nearby area confirmed the bitter humor of the Moros but developed no further symptoms of an uprising in force.

Nevertheless the troop commander, while keeping up the semblance of undisturbed routine, established vigilant outguards in the direction of greatest possible danger. Now that the Moro tribesmen had shown their teeth again, there was no telling what moment young warriors, goaded to frenzy by their Mohammedan priests, might go juramentado and cast themselves upon the Americanos.

Corporal Johnson's dark forebodings dissolved when he drew command of the outpost covering the direction of greatest danger—the thick cogon to the east of B Troop's camp. Such recognition could only mean that he was not held accountable by the captain for the disappearance of Private Boon. It meant, too, that the captain had not detected that single discordant *ping!* in the Mauser concert. The corporal's chevrons were secure, after all.

IN THE late afternoon Corporal Johnson's sharp eyes detected what he took to be a barely perceptible movement of the rank young cogon grass in front of a mango clump that skirted the field of fire of his outpost position. There had been a tropical downpour earlier and the hot sun, now poised just above the horizon ready for its swift plunge into the western sea, filled the air with gray veils of vapor.

At a repetition of the movement of cogon blades, Corporal Johnson released the lock on his loaded rifle. He was not certain that his eyes were not playing him tricks as they had done many times before in moments of excitement in the jungles. But with vapor in the air and the sun descending towards the moment of that swift darkness which comes to the Moro country, it was a time to put every nerve into the vigil.

His tense nerves relaxed slightly as moments wore on without further development. He was telling himself that he must have been mistaken when there was a crash behind him that sent his rifle to his shoulder before he recognized the reverberating boom of the sunset gun in camp.

"Atten-shun!"

He shouted the sharp command to his troopers by sheer force of habit and rose to his feet, stiff as a ramrod as the bugles sent the staccato notes of "To the Colors" hurtling into the air. In the next instant he broke, his rifle leaped to his shoulder and he fired intuitively before he recognized the haggard figure that had risen out of the tangle fifty yards away.

It was Private Boon, rigid at attention, his right hand raised to the brow of his hatless black head, his eyes fixed on the lowering colors. There was a scattering fire beyond as a covey of little brown figures darted back into the refuge of deeper cover. Corporal Johnson fired again, then ran forward towards the solitary figure.

Abraham Lincoln Boon did not look at him. His eyes remained steadfastly on the Stars and Stripes as they glided down the staff to the caressing lullaby of the field music. The corporal was within a dozen paces of the guilty Abraham before the infection of the other's example caught him. He snapped back to reverent attention.

Private Boon held his position without moving for several moments after the last notes of the bugles faded from the air, then weaved and sank slowly to the ground. Corporal Johnson found him writhing in the agony of a wound through the body—a Mauser wound that must have come from behind as he rose to his feet. There was another wound—an ugly deep flesh wound that had cut its way across his right cheek.

"Ah's moughty sorry, Cop'ral," Abraham said, pulling himself together with a tragic effort as his squad leader bent over him. "Ah's been plum out ob mah mind eber sense Ah mahried dat gal widout de cap'n's p'mission." He rolled from side to side in pain, then steadied himself again. "De Lawd knows, Cop'ral, what sinful act Ah was 'bout doin' when dem Christen trumpets brung me to mah sense. Ah's jus' plain glad that wasn' no Christen bullet f'm de ole troop went into mah black carcass."

Corporal Johnson said nothing in reply. He could hear the others rushing up now from the garrison. The bugles had held gallantly to the last note of "To the Colors" before taking up the brassy shriek of the "Call to Arms." A platoon would be deployed here in a moment—perhaps with the captain himself in command. With a sudden movement he reached down and tore from Private Boon's shirt collar the brass insignia of a captain of insurrectos, grinding it with his heel deep into the spongy ground.

"Sah," the corporal reported as the captain came up. "Private Boon was done makin' good his 'scape f'm them Moros which had him pris'ner w'en he done expose umself to fire like Ah expects any sojer of mah squad to do."

"Exposed himself? What you tryin' to say, Corporal?" the troop commander demanded. "What's the situation out here? What's this outpost rumpus? Speak quickly!"

"Sah, Private Boon of mah squad, sah," Corporal Johnson explained stoutly with a smart salute, "Private Boon done rises up on his laigs out of that cogon, sah, w'en them bugles sings out the Stahs an' Stripes is comin' down. Even, sah, w'en Private Boon knowed they was them murderin' Moro Mausers trailin' right behind, sah."

MASTER Sergeant Eben Johnson —th United States Cavalry, suddenly became something more than a droning voice in the deepening shadows of night before the regimental canteen. He stooped to pick up the half-burned manila rope that had fallen from his mouth unnoticed an hour before.

A tall black man in Prince Albert and high silk hat, and swinging a gold-headed cane, came sauntering up. He addressed the Reverend Mr. Waite, itinerant evangelist who had lately swooped down upon the colored section of the garrison to save their souls.

"Mistah Waite, sah," said the tall man solicitously, "we all's done waitin' fo' yo' to staht de suvices at de chapel. Sistah Abilene Boon's leadin' de congr'ation in song 'till you 'rives, sah."

Reverend Mr. Waite gasped audibly as he saw on the right cheek of the tall black man in the Prince Albert a long, mottled scar. As he started soberly away with the tall man, he turned a chastened black face back to Master Sergeant Johnson.

"Ah's jus' wonderin', Sahgent Johnson," he said with great deference in his voice. "Ah's wonderin' ef Ah c'n hab some of dem brass bugles down dere to play fo' dem chilluns at mah revival suvices?"

"Tales of the Teak Forest"

THE SHIKARI

Of Ai Poon and the Tawny Death

By REGINALD CAMPBELL

JOHN HINTON, forest manager of the Siamese Timber Company, gazed with set face into the jungle that walled round his camp. Somewhere in that dense black mass of tangled vegetation there crouched the man-eating tiger that for the last fortnight had terrorized the surrounding district. Villagers had disappeared one after the other and, in spite of all the white man's efforts, the brute still remained at large and was claiming new victims every other day.

Hinton's mind went back over the past week. For day after day he had tracked the mankiller, sometimes sitting up over the grisly remains of its kill, and sometimes stalking it on foot, but always without avail. Once, indeed, he had sighted the animal at a range of two hundred yards, but luck had been against him. His rifle, which could hit a bull's eye at nearly a thousand yards, was unfortunately away in far distant Bangkok for the renewal of a broken spring, consequently he had been obliged to recourse to his gun. The gun was a good little weapon, which could be used either for shot or ball cartridges, but with ball it was only reliable for some fifty yards. The tiger had therefore escaped destruction and, as if to show its disdain of the white man, had raided Hinton's own camp the very next night and taken one of his coolies.

Well, reflected Hinton grimly, there was nothing for it now but to re-engage Ai Poon to help him in the chase.

Now Ai Poon was one of the most famous shikaris and jungle men in all Northern Siam. The brown Lao knew the haunts of tiger, bear, sambar, wild elephant, and a hundred other jungle beasts. He could avoid unerringly the death that lurked in such horrors as hornets' and hamadryads' nests, for he seemed to sense their presence rather than to see them. He could steal the young of wild pig, trap civet-cats, otter and birdlife by the score, and once he had been known to enter the lair of a panther and capture two fat, squealing cubs in the absence of their mother.

In short, he was the perfect shikari, and for this reason Hinton had been in the habit of employing him from time to time when going on shooting trips. But on the last occasion, a bare month before the appearance of the man-eating tiger, Hinton had been compelled to dismiss Ai Poon for good and all, since he had discovered him in the act of petty pilfering in his tent.

Now, however—Hinton frowned—he must swallow his European pride and re-engage the man, for his own coolies' lives, as well as the villagers', were in danger.

Hardly had he come to the resolve when, from out of the encircling jungle, there appeared the figure of the shikari himself. He was a magnificent specimen of a man; tall, lithe, with muscles that, under the brown satiny skin, swelled and rippled like wind-blown corn. In an effortless stride, on bare feet that slipped noiselessly over the ground, he approached John Hinton's tent, then stood motionless before it.

The white man looked him fully in the eyes, but the shikari would not meet the steady gaze. Instead, Ai Poon lowered his head and chewed betel nut in sullen silence.

In that silence Hinton was aware what a vague sense of hostility emanated from the form before him, but he took no notice of this and came straight to the point.

"Ai Poon," said he, "there is the matter of the man-eating tiger."

"There is," agreed the other diffidently, knowing well that for once he was master of the situation.

"There is, *what?*" Hinton's voice held distinct menace as he said the words.

"There is, Lord," sulkily.

"That's better," observed the white man grimly. "And now about the tiger. Though never will I re-engage Ai Poon as my servant again, yet will I give him a reward if he brings news to me concerning the animal."

"And the reward, Master?"

"One hundred ticals," replied Hinton quickly. It was a large sum of money to offer, but men's lives were in danger and he was in no mood to haggle over a few pieces of silver.

"It is good, Lord," said the other after a pause. "I go seek the tiger."

The shikari salaamed and disappeared into the shadows of the rapidly falling night. Hinton then read an ancient newspaper till he was interrupted by the entry into his tent of one Ai Feeung, who was his best mahout and to whom he had once rendered great service in the past.

"The hour is late, Ai Feeung," said the white man, laying down the paper, "that thou shouldst come to visit me."

"Lord," whispered the mahout, after glancing fearfully around, "it is about Ai Poon that I have come."

"Ah!"

"The Lord has taken Ai Poon's help in the matter of the tiger?"

Hinton nodded.

"Lord, I like it not, since Chan Ooan my wife, who loves you, for was it not you who brought us two together, and was it not——"

"In the matter of Ai Poon," broke in Hinton sharply.

"Lord, Chan Ooan has heard from the women evil things concerning Ai Poon. It is whispered in the market place that Ai Poon has sworn vengeance on the Lord Hinton for his dismissal. For, since then, have not the women of the district laughed at him, saying that no longer is he a great shikari, but a pariah dog of a thief? So now has he come to much shame through this, wherefore does he hate you, Lord."

"H'm," muttered Hinton in a faraway voice.

"The Lord will say nought of this to Ai Poon?" asked Ai Feeung anxiously.

"He will say nought. Now go."

The mahout disappeared, and Hinton shouted to his boy for dinner. As he ate the tough, stringy chicken that served him for a meal, his eyes were exceedingly thoughtful, for the combination of a man-eating tiger and a man-hating shikari promised developments of far more than ordinary interest.

THE following morning Ai Poon, as ever chewing betel nut, arrived with the information that he had discovered the fresh tracks of the tiger on a sandy piece of ground half an hour's walk from the camp. Hinton, who had watched the speaker closely, then seized his shot-and-ball gun, loaded it, and after hastily placing some spare cartridges in his pockets, set off with the shikari.

After some thirty minutes' trudging along the little path that dribbled in and out between the towering forest stems, they arrived at the spot indicated by Ai Poon. Here the tiger tracks were plainly to be seen. They ran along the path, which was loose and sandy at this point, and then disappeared into some long, thick elephant grass to the right of the track.

"Lord," whispered Ai Poon, "I know well this place. The tiger, he come out of the jungle behind us, walk along path where we see his tracks, then go into grass. But, Lord, on the other side of the grass, which is but ten yards through, is a dry river bed. Now the river has pools, and I think he lie up there. If the Lord would go through the grass——"

"And Ai Poon?" queried Hinton.

"Ai Poon stay where he is," said the shikari briefly. "Ai Poon has no gun. Moreover it is not in the contract for him to go."

Hinton, however, showed for the moment no marked inclination to push forward through the elephant grass. Instead, he made a searching examination of his surroundings by scrutinizing every inch of the tiger tracks and every bush of the thick, low shrub that bordered either side of the path. This done, he broke his gun as if to assure himself beyond doubt that he had loaded both barrels. Then a frown of annoyance came over his features and he made a hurried search of the contents of his pockets.

"This is bad business, Ai Poon," he said at length, snapping-to the breech of his gun again. "In my haste to leave the camp I have brought the wrong cartridges. In place of ball have I brought buckshot, and of what avail is buckshot against a tiger? We will return to camp to seek the right cartridges."

He watched the shikari's face closely as he said the words, but the Lao's dusky features remained an expressionless mask, and a moment later both men were striding back along the path again.

After some ten minutes' progress they rounded a corner and came to a sharp halt. Crouching on the path, half-in and half-out of the surrounding bush, was the man-eater scarcely eighty yards ahead of them. On sensing the presence of humans, it stretched itself lazily, then rose and faced them.

Thereafter Ai Poon, shikari, galvanized into immediate and urgent action. In one clean bound he was at the foot of the nearest cotton tree, and a moment later he was perched on a bough a good thirty feet above the ground. He was safe, indeed.

Breathless, he peered down at the drama below him, and as he peered a smile of triumph illuminated his features. Of a truth Fate was working with him in his desire for revenge on the Lord Hinton. The unexpected appearance of the man-eater, the fact that the white man had brought the wrong cartridges—events were turning out even better than he had planned.

Ah, the Lord Hinton was going to fire, for he was raising his gun slowly, very slowly, to his right shoulder, which showed that though he was a great white master, yet undoubtedly he was a great fool as well. For to fire with buckshot at a tiger would merely result in angering the brute and forcing it to charge. A second shot at pointblank range might indeed kill the animal, but the impetus of the charge would overwhelm the white man before life had ceased beating. And one blow of that terrible paw . . .

Ai Poon glanced at the tiger. It was a magnificent animal in the prime of condition in spite of having taken to human flesh, and it was standing, tail slightly twitching, amber eyes aglow, facing its enemy. So, thought the shikari, there was no escape now for the man he hated. Climb a tree even were there time? Pah, he Ai Poon, could climb like any monkey, but the Lord Hinton was old and heavy, and moreover a fool into the bargain. Yes, Nemesis had come for sure.

His thoughts were interrupted by the crash of Hinton's gun. On the heels of the shot came a short, coughing roar, and next second a lithe, yellow streak flowed in lightning steel ripples towards its adversary. In the fraction of a second eighty yards dwindled to seventy, seventy to sixty, then fifty—whereupon Hinton's gun sent for a second time great shocks of reverberating sound through the quiet forest.

Ai Poon, from his refuge, blinked with astonishment, for, a full forty-five yards away from the white man, the tiger was lying motionless upon the sun-dappled ground. A moment later the shikari blinked again, for John Hinton was staring up at him, and his eyes were terrible.

"Son of a dog," he thundered, "come down."

Ai Poon, seized now with a strange panic, hastily obeyed the command.

"And now," said Hinton, reloading his gun, "thou wilt come back with me to camp. Should Ai Poon try to escape on the way, death awaits him."

Once back in the camp, Hinton summoned his headman and Ai Feeung, the mahout, and ordered them to guard Ai Poon. He then went into his tent, where he changed his cartridges for others prior to returning to the spot where Ai Poon had shown him the tiger tracks.

As he started out on his second journey that morning, he passed Ai Poon squatting sullenly between his guards.

"Ai Poon," said he, halting in his stride for a moment, "I spoke the truth, but not the whole truth, when I said I had the wrong cartridges. And wrong they were for the game that *you* showed me, but now I have the right kind."

Half an hour later John Hinton had arrived at the sandy piece of ground that bordered on the elephant grass. He then stooped and picked up several stones, which he threw one after the other into the thickest part of the grass. Soon a stealthy rustle came from within the depths of the waving vegetation, whereupon he gripped his gun at the ready and waited with every nerve keyed taut.

The faint rustle sounded again, this time a little louder, and then, from the border of the grass, there appeared a diamond-shaped head in which were set two eyes that were cold, glittering and utterly without soul.

In spite of his iron nerve, Hinton shuddered inwardly as he saw those evil eyes, for he knew that he was in the presence of the worst terror of the jungle: a terror that will chase anything living that threatens its nest, a terror that, over a short space of ground, can overtake a galloping horse, such is its speed, a terror whose bite is intense agony, followed by a death that is both merciful and quick.

But Hinton was in mood for death, and swift as light, before the great hamadryad should charge, he raised gun to shoulder and blew that diamond-shaped head to a thousand pieces with the buckshot he had substituted in place of the ball cartridges he had used for slaying the tiger.

Not for nothing had John Hinton realized that the chances of hitting with ball a swiftly moving king cobra's head were about one in a million.

THAT evening the camp of John Hinon, jungle-wallah, was crowded. In a circle on the sward outside his tent sat the whole of the white man's coolies, chainmen and mahouts, augmented by a goodly few of the villagers belonging to the surrounding district. In the center of the throng lay the bodies of the dead tiger and the dead hamadryad, while near them squatted Ai Poon, guarded as before by Ai Feeung and the little headman.

Presently the form of the Lord Hinton appeared and walked into the middle of the group, whereupon the natives ceased their eager chattering and hung breathlessly on his words.

"Undoubtedly," began Hinton, "Ai Poon is no shikari, but a monkey, for have I not seen him this very morning climb trees like any *waulk?*"

A pleased murmur ran through the serried ranks. Here was something amusing, and as the people of Northern Siam love amusement beyond all else, their dusky faces crinkled in delight.

Hinton continued. "He is moreover a monkey who walks backwards on his hands and knees."

"A monkey who walks backwards on his hands and knees?" Brown faces nearly burst with curiosity as they heard the words. Of a truth this was a great evening. Their enemy the tiger was slain by the white lord, and now a free entertainment was being provided in the shape of the humbling of Ai Poon. The audience settled themselves comfortably on their hams and waited for more.

It came.

"Now how do I know that he is a monkey that walks backwards? Well, I will tell you. He make false tiger tracks with the knuckles of his hands, which is a trick of which doubtless some of you have heard."

The onlookers signified that such was the case.

"But he have to go backwards on his knees to do this, since he must, with his hands, rub out the print of his knees on the sand if he wish me not to suspect."

"Wooi!" exclaimed the audience with bated breath.

"It all very clever," resumed Hinton. "But I see he has done this, wherefore do I say to myself, there is some danger in the grass towards which the tracks lead. But what danger? Now hornets, they do not like long grass, but sometimes the king cobras do for their nests. Thus did I take care that I not walk into that grass."

"But how, Lord," inquired one of the group, surprised at his own daring in thus speaking, "how did you know that those tracks were not of the tiger? For is not Ai Poon here well skilled in jungle craft?"

"He is," agreed Hinton slowly. "But his skill is only monkey skill, for while he walk backwards he spit betel nut onto some shrubs by the side of the path. This did I see when I examined the ground. Also he forget he have sand on his knees when he first come to tell me about the tiger."

A long roll of mirth went round the assembled ranks, and a deep flush reddened the dusky tan of the shikari.

"Ai Poon," continued Hinton when the laughter had subsided, "is a monkey, therefore shall the villagers see that no longer does he live with men. He shall go into the forest, and there remain, and be like other monkeys, save that he chews betel nut. See, he chews it even now."

The laughter rose again, and then subsided, for Ai Poon had risen slowly to his feet, and there was something new in his demeanor that made the crowd of scoffers silent. His great chest was flung out as, now fearless and unafraid, he faced that hostile throng.

"Lord," he said steadily, "it is even as you have said. I, once a famous shikari, have become a monkey and a laughing-stock to men. But, Lord, there is one way in which I can regain my lost prestige and still for ever the laughter of the villagers, the coolies and the mahouts."

He paused, and the white man saw that he was beginning to sway on his feet and that his eyes were glazing.

"Lord," he cried with a great voice, in one last access of failing strength, "in one thing you were wrong. It is not betel nut that I chew now, for I, Ai Poon, am of the jungle, and the jungle has befriended me."

"A-h-h!" a long drawn-out sound came from the onlookers as Ai Poon crumpled slowly to the earth by the side of the *pa* root that had poisoned him.

"Ai Poon has conquered laughter," said Hinton gravely, as he looked down upon the quiet form. "He has become a man again, and a man's burial shall be his."

ONE hour later John Hinton, together with the coolies, the villagers and the chainmen, was standing by a little mound in the center of a natural clearing. Outside the group there towered fifty of Hinton's greatest elephants, their heads just showing from out of the jungle gloom. A cool evening breeze, coming from over miles and miles of country untainted by civilization, caressed the towering teak trees and set the bamboo fronds faintly whispering. From somewhere in the forest there sounded the hoarse, ragged cough of a panther leaving its lair. The wildness was absolute.

"We shall not forget that he was a great shikari," said Hinton, gazing at the little mound.

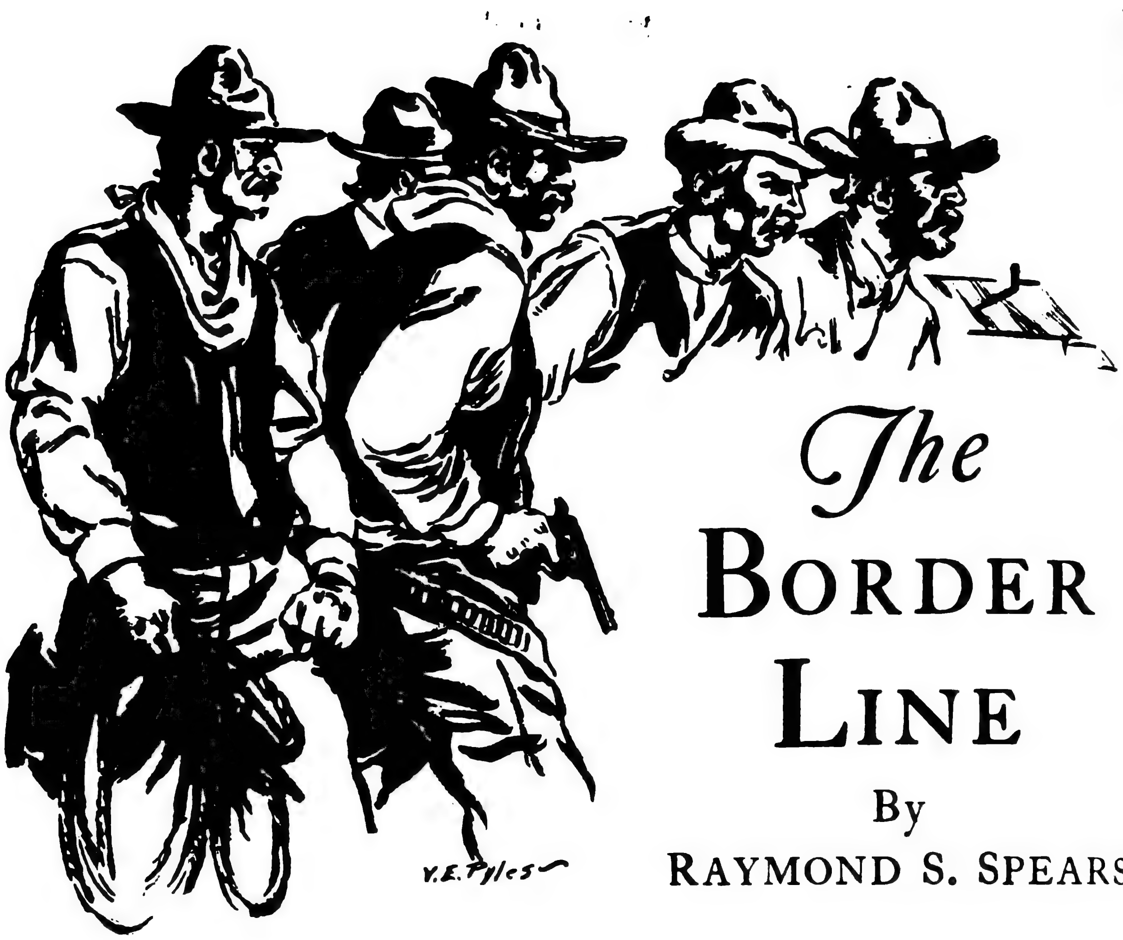
After a while he raised his head and stretched out his right hand.

"“Up!" he cried, and at the command all the mahouts on the elephants' heads raised their goads.

"A man of the jungle had died tonight," thundered John Hinton. "Come, my Lords, your salute!"

Down came every goad, and then from fifty great elephants there blared out one shrieking, shattering trumpet that crashed through the trees and, taken up by the surrounding hills, rolled round and round till it was lost on the distant horizon.

Thus, to the salute of the kings of the jungle, passed Ai Poon, jungle man and would-be murderer.



The Border Line

By

RAYMOND S. SPEARS

CHAPTER I

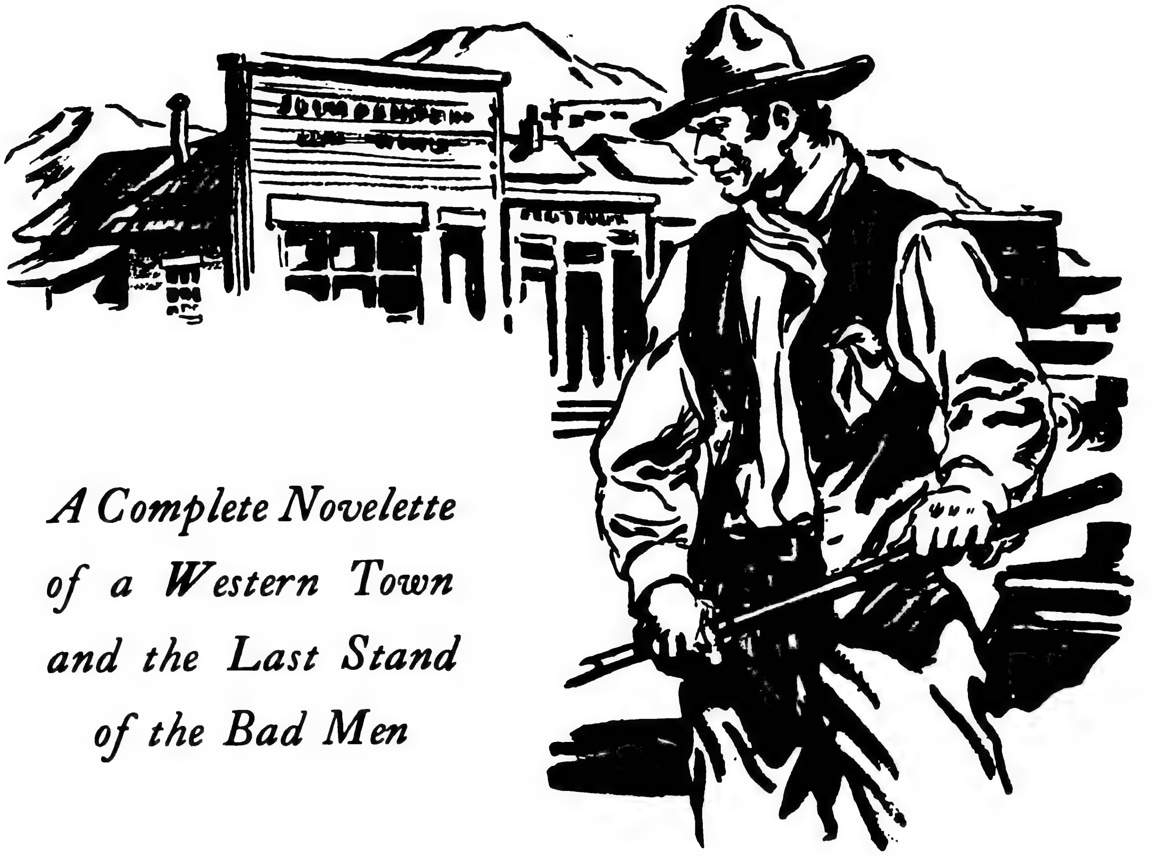
A HANGING IS INTERRUPTED

THE Sunflower Pool Room on the south side of Hurry Avenue had three tables, a lunch counter and a cigar stand. The evening was Wednesday, quiet and, as usually was to be found, sober in Echoes, where the steep slopes of Lonesome Mountain eased off into the Valley of Wraiths. And, indeed, as Vic Gaines, tall and slender, a carpenter by trade, played Gaid Leeds a game at the No. Eleven Table, the silence of the city was almost, but not quite commonplace.

On the previous evening Captain Rutherford Ganes—of somewhat similar name but no relative to Vic Gaines—had chased a boy who was throwing stones at a new and still vacant house, breaking the windows. The boy swiftly dashed for the brush down Cañon Run with the policeman in lively pursuit. Ganes fired his revolver into the shrubs along the pathway to effectively scare the boy.

By one of those curious freaks of circumstances, the boy, one Stubby Dicks, dropped into the dark thicket to hide, and a bullet from the revolver hit him in the body. Ganes carried the victim of accident to the hospital. And that was the excuse for all the gamblers, divekeepers and blind piggers of Echoes to talk themselves into a frothing rage. Captain Ganes was a faithful officer, and he had driven the outlaws out of his own precinct, covering the mouth of the cañon, down toward the valley where they were grouped in shacks and garish emporiums of pleasure at the foot of Hurry Avenue.

Pressure had been brought to bear on the city administration to clean up. Certain constrictions in the form of ordinances had been passed by the common council, and the common cause of the purveyors of tragic pleasure had united all their factions against the rest of the city population. Talking now among themselves, the purveyors decided that the shooting of the boy was just the opportunity they were waiting for. The proprietor of the largest dance hall, Ho-Jack Ripper, said so in his office to the gathering of the most important of proprietors thereabouts, and agreement was unanimous.



A Complete Novelette
of a Western Town
and the Last Stand
of the Bad Men

"Whoop out the boys," Ho-Jack ordered. "Get a rope!"

This was just after eight o'clock in the evening. There was a slight pause at the bar. Everyone took a drink of good red liquor—on the house. Then the men of the conference scattered, and half an hour later the crowd in Hurry Avenue, Down, was a turmoil beginning to growl. They started up the grade toward Hurry Avenue, Up, ten or twelve abreast with a three-quarter-inch rope a hundred feet long across the leaders' front and down the line of the procession.

The start of the procession was quiet enough. A low murmur soon was heard, and this increased in volume as the participants increased in energy and confidence. Low yelps were followed by louder ones, and the dust of an alkali street was raised by the trampling of stamping feet, to be whipped southward before a north wind, than which there is no more stinging and chilling a breath of the heavens.

As they marched, the mob was joined by an increasing number of men and youths who added to their careless delight in excitement the malignant hate brewed by the score or so of proprietors of the chief emporiums of Hurry Avenue, Down. The newcomers yelled louder and more enthusiastically. Somebody said that Stubby Dicks was dead, or anyhow, sure to die. That called for a hanging for murder, and when a victim for deserved hanging is needed to appease vengeance, no one could be more appropriate than an honest public official, notorious for doing his duty in spite of influence and evil desires.

The mob coiled up Hurry Avenue, and fell into step in the manner of legitimate parades. The yelps and murmurs ran into a kind of singsong, led by the high, penetrating voice of Ho-Jack Ripper. Ripper's voice was flung to the north wind:

"We're goin' to hang Ganes!"

Whereupon the mob in unison roared:

"We're goin' to hang Ganes!"

"Ganes killed a boy last night!" Ripper stated the case.

"We're goin' to hang Ganes tonight!" the mob howled.

"Ganes is a dirty coward to shoot a boy!" Ripper yelled.

"So we're hanging Ganes tonight!" the mob refrained.

Thus the quiet of Wednesday night of a late October day was fractured. And the shatterings spread louder through the town of Echoes, where some seven thousand traders, traffickers, mine and ranch and timber belt toilers and leachers had their temporary homes—hoping they were to be permanent.

Vic Gaines, deeply engrossed in figuring the angles of a shot on the pool table, absently chalked the tip of his cue. He had made this cue to suit his own big hands, long, wiry arms and his broad, powerful shoulders. The butt was two inches in diameter at the extreme end, and swelled to a half inch greater size within seven inches. The handle was thirty-two inches long and then tapered down with exquisite grace of line from black walnut through dovetailed joints into a slender springy tip of laveewood.

There wasn't another man in town who could handle that cue, and Vic toyed with its twelve pounds as though it were a twelve-ounce stick. Thinking in terms of green-cloth geometry, Vic was slow to become aware of what the others in the Sunflower Pool Room one by one had noticed. Vic was studying his angles and the chances of certain beautiful curves while even his partner, Gail Leeds was licking his lips nervously at the sounds coming up Hurry Avenue across the wail and whimper of the norther.

And then the insistent increase of demand for attention by a mob of scoundrels on the march penetrated the engrossment of Vic Gaines and stirred his oblivion with the approach of a shrill, tenor-voiced man who presently shrieked:

"We're going to hang Ganes!"

"Yes, we're hanging Ganes tonight!" the mob cried, its voice high and hoarse in the wind, like a wolf pack's funeral marching in the gloom of the unkempt streets of Echoes.

Vic Gaines shook his head as though the noise had disturbed his meditations. His face lifted, and to his dreamy eyes of blue-gray, crystalline in their brilliance, came a flashing spirit of puzzled comprehension.

He stood there looking toward the closed front doors, cocking his left ear forward to make sure he had heard aright. Then his face flushed as he listened.

"Ganes is a dirty coward. He shot a boy last night!"

"So we're hanging Gaines this evenin'!"

Now Vic Gaines knew all about the shooting of the young rascal and mischief-maker, Stubby Dicks. He also knew that Hurry Avenue, Down, had been waiting, cougar-like, for a chance to "get" Captain Rutherford Ganes because the policeman was honest and did his duty according to the code of public honor, the city and the State statutes. Captain Ganes had had three policemen killed and had himself been badly mauled twice, doing his duty.

Now the mob was going to Hurry Avenue, Up, to hang him. Were they? Vic Gaines' eyelids drew nearer together as for an instant he gave thought to what he had in mind to do. There were twelve or fourteen in the Sunflower staring at the front of the pool room, three or four moving doubtfully toward the door, lured to join in and at least see the fun. Others shrank, chilled by the jeopardy and the emotion of humans when terror is striding near.

But Vic Gaines made perhaps a sound. It may not even have been a chortle in his throat. Yet, low and indistinct as it was, the group in the pool room turned from looking for the mob to come along to see the more significant spectacle of Vic Gaines swinging his intrepid soul into action.

THEY saw Vic, his six feet three of wiry manhood, take his cue—which he had refused ever to sell—and break it across his knee with just a twitch of his two wrists. The slender tip end fell to the floor with a dry, ringing clatter, bounding with its own spring. Then taking a firm, right-handed grip on the big butt, like a boy's baseball bat, Gaines strode toward the door, whispering to himself like a grizzly getting its dander up:

"My name's Gaines. They ain't going to hang Cap'n Ganes tonight!"

The doors of the pool room opened outward. There were large latch and top and bottom bolts to hold the two halves closed against the wind. Vic went through without bothering to perform the details of opening his way in the normal fashion. He just broke the bits of metals and splintered the woodwork.

He strode like an iron shadow out into mid-street, crouching to gain speed with his long legs. His pale gray shirt, open at the throat, and a shine on his three-inch wide belt, silhouetted him in the bright, yellowish lamp lights from within the pool room. He turned and looked down the slope at the black dragon of human passion which was coming to get Captain Ganes to hang him to a low juniper branch or a high telegraph arm.

Vic was about thirty feet ahead of the pale streak made by the hanging rope across the front of the dark mass of humans. He straightened as though to loosen the muscles along their bones in his back and limbs. He leaned forward, then, his face up and down as he squinted to see after emerging from the bright light into that savage darkness. And the fire of his eyes swept the front line of dive and jointkeepers with a single glance.

"We're goin' to ha-ha-heh—" Ho-Jack Ripper shrieked, his voice high as he turned from giving the mob their line for a refrain. And at sight of the crystalline-ruby eye beams shining ahead of him, personally, as ahead of every mob-member in range, Ripper's voice went up into a sharp, short yip, like a hiccup. And the rumbling of the mob ceased, even the feet falling flat, plopping in the fluffy alkali. They had run square into a solid wall of intrepid manliness.

"He-he-he!" some one cackled nervously.

The sound angered Vic Gaines. There wasn't anything to laugh about in this business. He started for the point of the mob, where Ho-Jack Ripper led the way like the point of a plow. The charge of an iron man is the most fearsome thing for a coward to face. The scramble of a scratching lion, the spring of a tiger, the surge of a huge elephant—none of these are equal to a man's high indignation. Vic swung forward perhaps like a grizzly—but human, roused and eager for the clinch!

Ho-Jack Ripper was a fast-draw gunman. He forgot he had a revolver in his holster. He saw the long, oil-polish line of reflection on the dark cue-butt club drawn back for Vic Gaines to get the full swing or a deadly throw, if need be, and Ho-Jack jumped to one side.

Ho-Jack fell over his own feet, tripped in the alkali and began to run on his hands and knees, clawing to escape the fury that lifted into him from behind—with number eleven shoes and soles nearly an inch thick.

Exactly so! Vic Gaines lifted Ho-Jack and turned him head over heels by the kick of his sole-leathers. And as he kicked, Vic reached to seize the hanging rope and coiled it as he drove Ho-Jack through the scattering mob clear back to Hurry Avenue, Down, where he paused in his own tracks to look around in wonderment.

There was a numerous crowd of spectators along the sidewalks on either side the avenue, but Vic Gaines had the middle of the street all to himself. That was his promenade, up the center of that trampled thoroughfare, while at his feet, whimpering and sobbing, groaning with his broken ribs and bruised flesh, lay Ho-Jack Ripper, his six-gun lost out of his holster somewhere on the way—begging now for life.

"Don't any more, Vic! For Gawd sake —don't any more!" the keeper of the Step Light Ladies pleaded. "I didn't mean nothin'—we didn't mean you! We was jes' foolin'!"

"So was I!" Vic grunted. "Just damned fooling—that's all!"

In his big, long left hand Vic held the coil of rope, at which he stared. He turned to look at his cue butt in the other, right, hand, scowling.

"Why!" he exclaimed audibly. "That's my cue. I busted *it!*"

He swallowed regretfully and seeing some habitués of Hurry Avenue, Down, approaching, solicitous for the welfare of Ho-Jack Ripper who was squirming where he lay, Vic stepped aside. And as they carried Ho-Jack away to the hospital to occupy the next room to Stubby Dick, the carpenter returned up the middle of the street, his wide soles lifting spurts of dust into the wind, to avoid the silent throng on the sidewalks. He entered the Sunflower Pool Room, a way widening before him.

Here he looked at the coil of rope again. He regarded the thing with an expression of some disgust, and then tossed it up on the prongs of a great elk head on the wall, where it dangled all over the antlers, picturesquely. And from that moment no one ever thought of taking it down again; no, indeed!

VIC went again to Table No. Eleven where he gazed at the lie of the pool balls, resuming his study of the problem left where Gail Leeds ran out his play. Apparently the problem was now clear and simple, and Vic went feeling along the lines of stock cues trying to find one which had an adequate weight and the proper feel. He took a stick at last, though with a look of regret at the two pieces of his beautiful cue.

Before the game was ended, Mayor Corbin of Echoes with two members of the police board arrived at the Sunflower. They stood by while Vic finished his run, pocketing the last ball. They had heard something, it seemed, and the mayor began with a slight cough of embarrassment.

"Mr. Gaines, we were just wishing you'd accept a position on the Echoes police force?"

"What—me?" Vic exclaimed. "Why I don't know anything about policing, or such."

"We'd like to make you special city marshal, if you would just as soon."

"Nope!" Vic shook his head, coloring with confusion at this attention. "I'm just a carpenter, that's all. Not much of one at that. I never did think of getting into politics."

"This isn't politics," Mayor Corbin exclaimed. "If it was politics we'd never ask you. That stands to reason!"

Vic shook his head. He appreciated the honor. As long as he lived he would remember with pride his chance to be a city marshal. But he just knew he wouldn't be a good one, on account of his ignorance of legalities and such.

So the mayor and commissioners left and Vic played pool for hours, studying curves and angles—besides squinting at the splintered ends of the two pieces of his cue. Doggone! He'd ought to have taken some other cue, or a toothpick, but he was excited and had kinda lost his temper. Huh!

Then Vic went ambling up along Hurry Avenue, Up, around the corner into Whipsaw Street to his boarding house where he tiptoed through to his room, noiselessly. But, hang it, in every room along the hallway was a light and a door ajar, with females and males sitting up or watching for him to go by; what for he couldn't see the sense of.

At the same time, when one door swung open and a slender girl, too tall to be merely chic, stepped out to confront him, he stopped short and stood crumpling his hat in embarassment and suffering delight.

"Vic," she addressed him. "It was perfectly wonderful. I saw it!"

"Yes'm!" he nodded. "I don't expect I ever can make another cue like that'n and now it's——"

"What *are* you talking about?" she asked, bewildered, for she had never chanced to know the love and choice of Vic's life, his wonderful cue.

"Why—uh—I broke my cue. I reckon I spoiled it!" he explained, and took the two pieces from under his arm, further to elucidate.

She took them both affectionately. She drew her hand along the black walnut butt whose linseed oil polish she had seen that night raised above Vic's head—for business, not for play. She even leaned her cheek against that norther-cooled stick, looking at Vic's puzzled countenance and unawakened eyes the while.

And Vic, gazing at her, realized that she somehow liked that piece of dismembered wood-joining. It occurred to him that probably he had sprung the butt, anyhow. Probably it would never hang the same as before, and come to think about it he reckoned he might as well start all over again, with new stock to shape another cue. Likely it wouldn't be so much bother and he could do a better job of it. Taking these things into consideration—and somehow aware that this girl happened to be awake and liked that chunk of walnut, he diffidently and hesitatingly offered:

"If you could use it, why you can have it—if you want it."

"What?" she whispered.

"I didn't mean any 'fense!" he gasped. "I just——"

"You'd—you'd let me have *this!*" she cried.

Her tone, her expression, her gesture as she hugged that hunk of cold walnut informed Vic that he had said something wonderful, a brilliant remark to a girl—the first time in his life that he had ever been conscious of being clever or witty in feminine presence. Or perhaps it was she needed the stick for something, or other? No matter what—'course she could have it!

So Vic said so, like it didn't amount to shucks, and she just rolled her eyes up, quizzical and reflective, as quietly she withdrew from the hallway with its many listening ears. And Vic, after gazing at the closed door a moment, pulled himself together and walked on noiseless, vibrationless feet on the way to his own room. For this is the way of boarding houses in Echoes.

And while Vic sat staring at his hands, puzzled, in that other room Laura Naylor sat gazing at the two fragments of the finest billiard and pool cue west of the Mississippi. And what was in her feminine mind at that moment boded much good for Vic Gaines, though he could not possibly suspect that. A man seldom does.

CHAPTER II

A COP THEY DIDN'T KILL

THE lynching fiasco, wherein the Hurry Avenue, Down mob had failed to hang Captain Rutherford Ganes, left in the minds of the mob a very definite bad taste. The idea that one lank carpenter of no particular importance had buffaloed five hundred or so men, who prided themselves on being mighty good, left the best of them feeling sheepish and resentful. At the same time they had to laugh, with wry faces, too. Ten nights later they killed a cop on Hurry Avenue, Down—filled his back full of swan shot, part of which cut his back in two.

The trouble was, of course, that the policeman had come into Hurry, Down. No need whatever of a cop in that part of town. Bouncers took care of disturbers of the peace in the dance halls, blind pigs and green rooms. The idea that an officer of the law might possibly be needed was insulting. The mayor, police board and some of the others needed a lesson. The bushwhacking of Tom Wesson, without a chance for his life, was as significant in its meaning as when somebody was let through the county jail gallows trap to dance on air.

There were three weeks in which no policeman passed Busy Corner after dark, heading down the grade. Daytimes a policeman sometimes went down the slope, however, generally on what was regarded as unimportant business. Hank Hubbard, No. Six of the Echoes force was city court officer, and he was quite an old man with gray hair, a gray mustache, and a long term of service behind him. It was his job to serve warrants where no trouble was anticipated. And on a Wednesday morning in early December it chanced that Jason Wicks was wanted for assault and battery.

Jason was clerk in the Ripper House, adjoining Ho-Jack's Step Light Ladies emporium of amusement. There, rooms were let out to people too intoxicated to walk home, or taking temporary rests, or enjoying a hiatus between sports. By chance a commercial traveler who had never been in Echoes before went to the Ripper House and sought a room. He handed the clerk, Jason Wicks, his sample case and other valuables to be cared for during the night. Jason naturally took them, and in the morning the commercial traveler found his wad fifty-five dollars shy. Wicks was summoned, and smote the business man on the jaw as an argument in a question of veracity. Accordingly, as it was bad for a town's reputation to have a drummer assaulted as well as mulcted, a warrant was issued for the arrest.

Policeman Hubbard went down to the Ripper corner and found that Jason Wicks was in bed and the clerk sent down word that the damned proceedings could be adjourned till he felt better than he did on this morning after. Hubbard went up and dragged Jason out of bed, down the stairway and headed him up the street dressed in scarlet and blue pajamas, which would have been funny if the Down locale of Hurry Avenue had been in a good-natured frame of mind. As it was, a dozen or so early risers went out and surrounded the gray old policeman and pushed sticks between his legs, crowded in on him, and diverted him over against the high brick wall of the stage livery barn and station.

Vic Gaines was puting in a new master beam which had gone dozey with dry rot at the rear end of the stable. As he was shaping up a brace with his adz, he heard without, a rising sound of confusion, shouts and scuffling. He turned his head to listen, curious to know what was going on.

"Get 'im!" he heard someone say "Thataway—soak 'im!"

And a moment later he heard a shrill, familiar feminine cry of alarm:

"Don't do that. You cowards!"

Vic swung to the floor below and strode around to take a look at what he could hear with such increasing clarity. As he stepped around the corner from the station entrance he saw the gray, bare head and face of Cop No. Six—he didn't know his name—rising sturdily above the clawing, crowding pack of porters, hangers-on, bartenders and two gamblers. And he also caught a glimpse of the scarlet and blue pajamas, which was a joke in Echoes gossip, for it was Jason Wick's bid, by an oddity of raiment, for fame.

Vic saw a fist raised and his quick eyes caught the black points of brass knuckles across the fingers of the hand. He saw the cat-claw rake as the sharp ends came down the side of the policeman's face, followed instantly by a gushing of blood. The policeman began to sag amid the wagging, thrusting heads reaching toward their victim.

Now the carpenter was an impulsive fellow. He knew well enough that this matter was no affair of his, none of his business by any stretch of the imagination. Nevertheless, he rocked along on his long legs and dove, literally, into the crowd jamming upon the policeman, pulling him down. Probably nine out of ten of the gang thus assembled impromptu had seen other cops done to death on that criminal beat. Hurry Avenue, Down had not only made it impossible for an officer of the law to appear there at night; they were teaching the Up end to mind its own business, even in the daytime. And as Vic came to the nucleus of the disturbance he saw a hand drawing a knife from under a coat collar to stick into the cop who was now on his knees, going under. He had fastened Jason Wicks to his own left wrist with a self-acting pair of handcuffs, and escape was beyond hope.

Vic Gaines caught the hand with the knife and straightened the arm above it right square back, despite the crackling of bones and snapping of muscles. The would-be killer's agonized shriek of torment rose above the yelping lust for blood.

Vic reached beneath the torn coat of the policeman, thrust his hand to the big revolverbutt, which Hubbard should instantly have drawn to use in the beginning. There was no room to make poses or talk turkey. Vic just wiped about him, shoulder level with himself, and the revolver muzzle sight, half an inch high, cut across the nose bridges of three men, all close in. He walloped the big gun back the other way and stood astride the now prostrate policeman while five men surged back to give him arm's-length room, out of reach of the weapon used till then as a club. And those who had been nearest had gashes horizontal across their faces where the muzzle had torn through them.

They could all see Vic Gaines now. He had room for his big feet and he couldn't reach the scoundrels with his arm, long as it was. That was satisfactory to him in his tempestuous frame of mind.

"You—" he choked as he threw into their cowardly hearts the contempt of a strong man for craven pack hunters. "I'm going to kill the—the—" his eyes in sweeping his surroundings saw the tall, handsome young woman, Laura Naylor, whose cry had brought him to the rescue. And the profane language that was on his tongue tip for an instant strangled him, and then he continued, "Any man in sight when I've counted ten I'll kill. One-two-three-four-five—six—seven—eight—nine——"

RECORDS in sprinting were broken for Hurry Avenue, Down in those few seconds. The pack scattered and leaped for cover. There was that something in the sound of Vic Gaines' voice to convince them of the truth of his lightest statements. If he promised to kill he would keep his word. And in terror-panic they fled. One man leaped through a plate glass window because he heard "Eight" and could not be sure he'd make cover otherwise. And two who tripped, landing on their heads and knees, dodged it into blind pigs beneath the swinging shutter half-doors.

Vic raised Hubbard to his feet, and, with an arm around the heavy old man, his fingers digging into the forearm of Jason Wicks, supported the policeman up the grade to the city hall, on into the courtroom. Jason was white with pain and fear. He was at all times a dapper, pointed-nose little dandy, and for once he forgot his raiment, those scarlet and blue pajamas, and his plastered-down hair, unmussed even now. His big brown eyes rolled with flickering and apprehensive blinkings at Vic, whose low growl had given the scoundrel to understand what was his duty in the coming court proceedings.

Judge Divens gazed with a slight frown on the head of the procession. The courtroom loungers and officials stared, rising to their feet. Someone opened the rail gate and willing hands helped Policeman Hubbard through to a seat, while the manacle from the cop's hand was unlocked and reclapped tightly on Wick's other wrist.

Vic did not stay for the court proceedings. He stood for a moment abashed, and then somehow managed to slip away like a deer in thick brush, unseen in his departure. And thus he missed hearing Jason Wicks begging the city recorder to enter a plea of guilty for whatever he was charged with—and apologizing to the commercial traveler for having sweat his roll that way.

"And Mr. Hubbard," he turned to the exhausted and bedraggled, bleeding policeman. "I never said a word. I didn't start them——"

"You lie!" a clear feminine voice interrupted the breathless effort. "I saw you jerk your head to have that gang attack this officer of the law!"

"You'll swear to that, Miss Naylor?" Judge Divens asked, as the young woman silenced the scoundrel who would by perjury seek to crawl out of his predicament.

"I shall gladly," she replied. "I've seen an example today of a citizen doing his duty. I wish—I'd like to profit by it!"

"I'll plead guilty!" Wicks exclaimed. "I mean it—yes, sir!"

"All right. Thirty days in jail for assault, then," the judge said, tersely.

"But I thought—a fine, Judge!"

"Jail—thirty days," Judge Divens insisted.

Wicks stared at the floor for a moment and then with a shrug of resignation accepted the punishment.

"And I'll sentence you to one year in jail, for theft," the judge added, and Wicks gasped. "But possibly a suspension could be arranged if or when the victim of the theft is reimbursed for the full amount of his damages, including lost time and annoyances."

The commercial traveler a few hours later completed his business in Echoes and departed, thoroughly well placated, for the Ripper establishment would care for its own, even if it cost five hundred dollars, cold cash.

Vic Gaines went back on his job of carpentering. He had worked only a little while, after his half hour lay-off when the voice of a man he could not see came from below:

"You ain't mindin' your own business, carpenter. Some is sick of yer buttin' in!"

Vic swung down hotly from his beam perch but failed to find the surly and hidden talker. In some way the fellow had slipped out of the stable, or he had talked through it along the spaces between floor and ceiling. But for the carpenter the warning was sufficient. He had within a short time twice interfered in the activities of the Hurry Avenue, Downs, and they were of a type to whom interference was an insulting insinuation that their occupations were disreputable. When at noon Gaines worked overtime, making up for his lay-off, one trait of his character—square-dealing—was revealed.

Another, quite unsuspected, was indicated when instead of going straight up the street as usual he glanced furtively from the shadows at the front, and then going back into the alley, slipped swiftly up the grade to the Café Enough where he straddled the inmost of the counter stools and sat partly facing the front door as he ate. He was not noted for his caution.

And that afternoon he continued working after hours till he had given his full day's labor at the repair task. Then he circled back again and returned to his boarding house, where he took his place as usual for supper. On his entrance talk around the dining-room ceased, for it had been gossip about the carpenter's feat. Quick greetings were enthusiastic, yet subdued. Some did not look at him but went on with their meals—careful folk who thought best to be indifferent as regards a marked man.

THE early arrival of Laura Naylor in the dining-room had prevented discussion of another topic of conversation. She had volunteered information in the city court, going out of her way to do it, and had called a disgraceful scamp for trying to excuse himself because he had urged a gang attack on the officer who had arrested him.

Laura Naylor was clear blue-eyed, and walked erect with honest vision in a community where her type was as yet so rare as to make her conspicuous. She was the amanuensis of attorneys, copying, filling in legal documents, taking short-hand notes of testimony and writing letters for various people who needed typewriter assistance. Her presence in Echoes was unexplained, there being no satisfactory argument in her favor—a girl alone in a lively town where hard-rock miners occupied one section and the money-makers another, a third being given over to the gambling, dancing and drinking of a new, wide-open town.

It was not well to have Laura Naylor attract the unfavorable notice of Hurry Avenue, Down. She had appeared to help force the issue against one of Ho-Jack Ripper's pets, for Wicks, as clerk of the Ripper House, occupied a delicate and responsible position. Thirty days in jail for Wicks was an attack on the whole crowd below the Busy Corner where reasonable honesty was across the street from unreasoning depravity.

Laura gave Vic a clearly defined greeting of welcome as he took his seat nearly opposite her. He had not heard of her going to court and his bow was a bit reserved. It was like him not to be too conspicuously friendly toward her—that might involve her. After supper, though, when he sat for half an hour reading the *Echoes Recorder*, he came upon a paragraph which brought his feet from his room's spare chair noiselessly to the floor. But his sitting up was emphatic. The news item said:

> Jason Wicks was taken to the police court this morning by Officer Hubbard who had some difficulty in serving the warrant on the popular Ripper House clerk. Miss Laura Naylor appeared as witness of the disturbance and Mr. Wicks pleaded guilty on charges. Judge Divens sentenced him to thirty days in jail. A commercial traveler was complainant and he left town on the afternoon stage. The carpenter, Vic Gaines, assisted the court officer in making the arrest, and five well-known citizens afterwards had their injuries treated at the City Dispensary, which once more demonstrated its great value in emergency cases and minor treatments.

Vic Gaines glanced through the newspaper quickly, and then jamming his hat down on his head, he went down to the Sunflower Pool Room. Instead of going to pick a cue for a game, he drew Dan Wiggin the proprietor to one side and asked him just what had happened in the recorder's court that morning.

"I wasn't there," Wiggin answered, "but a fellow who was says Laura Naylor followed you 'n' Wicks and Hubbard and when Wicks did a song-and-dance, how he didn't know what it was all about and he was going along with Hubbard peaceably, she called him a liar to his face, pronto. He caved then, and took his thirty days. Ripper settled with the drummer they fleeced."

"What they saying about her?"

"Well, what would they say? She butted in, didn't she? It wa'n't none of her business. She cinched Wicks with her testimony, and that hurt. You know that. And you—my gosh, Vic, you gone crazy?"

"They were riding an old man with gray hair" Vic replied, "I couldn't stand that!"

"Don't yo' reckon they'll make you stand something worse?"

"You guess they'll hold it ag'in me?" Vic asked.

"Will they? Don't you know Ripper? You know well as I do what they done to the cops. Three dead the past six months. And now Hubbard's down——"

"What!"

"Didn't you know? He kinda went dizzy and couldn't seem to understand late this evening. 'Bout supper time they took him to the hospital. They're working on him up there now. One of those belts on the head started something leaking in his brain, they say, and they say it's a bleeding, kinda paralyzing him. Likely to die, somebody was saying. The knuckles raked him on the side the face, too, 'bout half an inch deep, scraping the temple and his cheek bone both. Uh-h! You'd think an old feller like him'd get a peaceable job, wouldn't you?"

Vic made no reply. He sat a long time in the dark corner of the pool room, all shut up like a jacknife, his heels hooked on the seat of the chair, and his arms wrapped around his shins, his jaw on his knees. What he was thinking no one could guess, but his friends hoped he was thinking good sense. Anyhow, he wasn't playing pool that night, and he had sins to think about—two times when he hadn't minded his own business.

Toward midnight Vic straightened out, ate a piece of apple pie and drank a glass of sweet milk at the lunch counter. Then going out the back door he slipped homeward by devious and unexpected ways. Before crossing open places he paused to look carefully around, and instead of going in either the front or back ways of the boarding house he swung himself up on the shed at the back, and, keeping in the shadows, found footing and hand-holds by which he reached his own window on the dark side of the building.

When he entered his room he knew instantly by the feel that he was not alone in that dense gloom. And on the instant he leaped to seize the dark shape of the intruder.

CHAPTER III

ASKING A BRAVE MAN TO RUN AWAY

HO-JACK RIPPER, Nancy his wife and adviser, Bat Duncon and four or five others sat in the office of the big establishment Ripper conducted, to talk in low tones about their annoyances. Nancy was a strikingly handsome woman, pale faced and narrow eyed, yet her wide lips could flash a smile difficult to forget, while her long, dark lashes would lift as though she were surprised to see so much admiration or to hear such compliments.

Then men were given to suggestions of violence. They talked as though the best thing to do was just send somebody after Vic Gaines with a sawed-off shotgun. Anybody could get him, Duncon declared. Course, what might follow would perhaps make planting Vic that way inexpedient or unprofitable. Mere bushwhacking wouldn't do. Lots of people were likely to think something right off, if that happened.

Ripper was of the idea that the best method would be to have somebody just naturally pick a quarrel with Vic, and then shoot him in self-defence. This was quite ticklish, and the killer would have to be able to prove he didn't know Vic, never was seen or believed to carry a gun. Shooting down an unarmed man wasn't good policy, either. If only it could be arranged to kill him promiscuously, with a whole lot under suspicion, but nobody really known to have done it—that would be fine! But Vic seldom did come down Hurry Avenue, especially after dark. He hung out around the Sunflower Pool Room, as every one knew, and Dan Wiggin would hate to have Vic killed on his premises, naturally enough.

The men talked and argued for a long time. Nancy Ripper sat listening with her chin on her fist, smiling occasionally and then again sniffing unnoticed in the men's abstraction. They had innumerable suggestions to make, but even the men were keen enough to see how badly the best of them all met the needs of the hour.

Having exhausted all their ideas, Ho-Jack turned to Nancy.

"Well, you aren't talking any?" he remarked, with some asperity.

"Been no chance that I noticed. Not even to slip a word in edgewise," she laughed in a light, rippling voice, taunting, exasperating and deadly true.

"Well, perhaps you'd had something to say if you did talk?" Ripper exclaimed, cringing at the sting of his wife's taunt. He was beholden to her for most of his property, his successes, his games of chance—and she knew it.

"Likely. I generally do," she admitted.

"How can we handle this scoundrel Vic, then. And that girl Laura Naylor? We can't stand that. Don't take much to upset our applecarts!"

"Why—uh—justifiable homicide might do," the woman smiled, as though she were talking about a box of candy.

"Well—Hades! We've figured that all night, so far! Sure—that's what we want, just the checker!" the men exclaimed, some morosely and some with hopeful enthusiasm.

"What'd justify killing 'im?" Ripper asked, helpless in his pleading.

"I'll have to think it over," she answered, her eyes squinting as she gazed reflectively at her husband hard and burly, despite his affectation of being something of a dandy, genteel in his habits and bearing.

That was all the satisfaction she gave them. When urged to give a hint of her idea she shook her head.

"'Twont do!" she replied. "I'll have to work it out for myself, first. You'll have to take my word for it; my idea's good and when the time comes you can shoot him down on the courthouse steps and everybody'll say it serves him right."

The men looked at her incredulously, trying to read in her handsome, fascinating features the answer which her cunning mind refused to give. She left them instantly with a twitch of her skirts and a backward glance at her husband, who cringed beneath it. Even he could not divine what was on her mind. At the same time, Hurry Avenue, Down, from the boss, who was ripper, to the slinking alley rats who crept along the shadows by night, was obliged to defer to the woman who plagued while she advised them in their dilemmas.

Nancy Ripper went to her cabin out at the edge of the junipers on the city limit line in the northeast corner of Echoes. There she kept house and there Ripper came to rest at dawn, before or after, when the night's grafting was done. Nancy was herself a midnight bird, going home usually after supper was served in the dance hall and green room, following which the patrons of Ripper's several establishments were apt to grow rough and coarse. Nancy did not like crudeness. She affected a genteel manner and a society manner. At the same time she was fit mate of the proprietor of the games and dens grouped with the Step Light Ladies.

At home she caught up quite other garments than her gay cloak and saucy cap. She put on a shawl and drew it tightly around her head, and having discarded her dancing slippers, she put on quite as fine a pair of walking shoes—and headed across town to the meager section where boarding houses were numerous and where in particular one stood on Whipsaw Street, kept by a Mrs. Valer, and whose patrons were noticeably industrious and reputable.

NANCY RIPPER, with her shawl drawn over her features, which if seen were quite unmistakable, went to the kitchen door where an old man cook, cripple of a mine accident, was too tired to stand and so was sitting down, peeling potatoes for another day. They called him "Spuds," because of his potatoes. Nancy had seen him blinking as he wagered his dimes and quarters, one by one, on the wheels in her husband's establishment. She whispered him to the doorway shadows, where she pressed a single eagle into his palm. He knew the feel of gold, detected the weight of it—and he needed tobacco and a pint of liquor.

"What is it?" he asked, whispering.

"Which is Vic Gaines' room?" she asked.

"Second floor back corner—nor'east," he said. "That all?"

"Does anybody name of Laura Naylor live here?" she asked.

"Yeah. She's t'other side the same hall near th' head o' the stairs."

"She home?"

"I reckon so. Don't work much nights, 'cepting for commercial travelers in the Mirage Hotel."

"Be all right 'f I go see her? Can I slip in?"

"I'll see 'f the trail's open!" Spuds whispered, and scuffling on his way, he presently returned with word that there were lights in some rooms, others were dark, and he reckoned Laura Naylor was reading a book. She read lots of books, nights, everybody said.

Nancy Ripper darted across the kitchen and gliding up the stairway, noiselessly, she found the door of the one public stenographer in Echoes. There she knocked so softly that she had to try a second time to attract the attention of the girl within.

Incautiously Laura came boldly to the door and speaking, opened it wide. She stared surprised at the shawled figure before her.

"Why," she asked, "what is it?"

"Sh-h!" the visitor said, entering, "I've something I must tell you——"

And behind the closed door Nancy Ripper let the shawl fall from her head and stood revealed—the wife of the Hurry Avenue, Down boss and resort keeper. Laura gazed at her with immobile countenance and for an interval the two handsome women surveyed each other, taking stock and measure. Then, not too long delaying, Nancy said:

"I reckon you know who I am—Nancy Ripper. I thought I'd better come tell you what's going on, down town."

"I think I can be trusted to mind my own business," Laura interrupted with cool indignation.

"You don't get me right," Nancy whispered. "They'll get you—if you don't take care. See what I mean? I hated to see you trapped, not knowing what was coming. They're bad—I'm bad myse'f—but—well, you're honest. I didn't have your education, and probably if I'd been trained like you are, it wouldn't have made much difference far as that goes. Same time—I come to give you fair warning."

"Why—what would or could they do?"

"I don't know. They don't know, yet. You got to be ready, that's all. And first they'll mess up Vic Gaines."

"What? You don't mean—?"

"Him and you. You butted in on them," Nancy said. "I could tell him something if I had a chance. Where's he at?"

"Why—down town. He goes down evenings——"

"Reckon he's got a girl some'r's," Nancy said casually.

"No. Oh, no!" Laura declared emphatically. "He doesn't pay any attention to women."

"Don't he?" the visitor mused. "Well, he'd better pay 'tention to me—I mean he'd better listen. You see—they're going to kill him some way—legal. I don't know how it'll figure out. Same time I despise it. Vic's a fool, butting in. But most men are. When I tell him what I know, prob'ly he'll be sensible. All he'll have to do is just go away. They won't follow him. Be glad enough to be rid of him!"

"Go away? Mr. Gaines go away?" the young woman exclaimed, her voice a betrayal to the shrewd dance hall woman.

"They'll kill 'im!" the visitor insisted. "I must put him on his guard, so's he can make his getaway. I must see him tonight. They've been settin' there all this night, planning and figuring. Now they've schemed it. I tell you, they'll get that man. It's forty to one—it's a hundred against one, I tell you! Sho'! He could brave them down to their faces, but no man has eyes to see what's aimed at his own back. If I could have a chance to tell him——"

"Why—oh, you'll have to wait for him to come home. I'll go look for him. I'll bring him. You go to his room, Mrs. Ripper. I'm so grateful to you. Sh-h! Come this way. I'll show you his room. Then I'll go find him. I'll bring him. You'll wait for him, won't you?"

"Yes, dearie, I'll wait," Nancy Ripper promised. "Look till you find him. Sometimes he's at the Sunflower, like you said. But sometimes he goes down Hurry Avenue, too—below the Busy Corner. I've seen him down thataway. I never did see him in my husband's joint. He must go further down—huh!"

LAURA NAYLOR flung around herself a cloak to shed the cold night wind. She pulled a tam-o'-shanter knit-woolen cap with a long tassle dangling from it down over her head. And then she led the way to Vic Gaines' room, and closed the door behind the woman who entered it. She herself scurried swiftly and noiselessly along the hallway in her stout moosehide moccasins which she used as slippers in her room. Fine footwear anywhere when still walking is needed. She ran down stairs, out the front doorway; and Mrs. Nancy Ripper, herself a cat-treader, saw her depart.

Then, betting on a sure thing, she sat on the edge of Vic Gaines' bed waiting for his return. By the luminous hands of her watch she saw that it was already close to midnight, and she knew Vic's habits. He had for a long time attracted her attention by his indifference, his swinging walk, his gray-blue eyes, his square shoulders. And now, lately, by his curious and foolish feats of utter intrepid carelessness. She never had dreamed of him as that bold!

She sat waiting what seemed like a long time—of course. She listened, at first to the whispering of the winds around the building and whistling among the alleys and along the sides of the houses. Then she heard another sound, a creak, a slight rattle, the straining of a beam as some heavy weight came gently and slowly to rest on a sheet-metal shed roof.

A deeper shadow than the night without darkened the window and firm, sure hands lifted out the well-fitted fly screen. A man came through the aperture thus opened, and there stood Vic Gaines within the room, tense, alert, stopping for a moment where he was.

Nancy Ripper's eyes, the lids drawn down over them to veil the fire she knew might reveal her presence, watched him curiously, wondering at his unmistakable alertness. She remembered then, that perhaps the perfume she used, a delicate blend, might have betrayed her. That would be all right! But there might be some other thing—her mere presence, for example, to tell him she was there!

The next instant he had seized her with all the vigor of a man alert, ready to meet any odds of enemy attack, however desperate. She did not make a sound, but after a moment, as he held her wrapped completely about with his long arms, he shook himself loose, puzzled, surprised and then alarmed. There had been no attack but his own, no resistance, nothing but complete acquiesence. He reached to turn the electric switch.

"Ugh!" he grunted when he saw, and drew hastily away from the most astonishing visitor he had ever had.

"Mr. Gaines," she instantly exclaimed, "I'm Nancy——"

"Yes'm. I know that," he blinked. "I never did forget—Nancy!"

"They — down Hurry Avenue — have been planning all day and all night how to get yo'!" she went on, breathlessly. "I come to give yo' fair warning. They'll shoot yo'. They'll do it!"

"Shoot me?" he puzzled.

"They *will!*" she insisted. "Then they'll likely plant a gun on yo', two-three chambers empty, so's to make yo' out wrong as well as daid. Oh, there's nothing they won't do, suh! I come to warn yo' fair! I come to give yo' a chanct fo' yo' life, Vic. I *did!*"

Gaines stood staring at her. He was never a man to give women much chance to do him a favor. Mrs. Valer, the buxom old boarding house keeper, mothered him a bit. The little girl, Ladema, who waited on table, eyed him covertly and shyly; saw that he had all he could eat. The chamber maid, a quarter-breed Indian, Walking Flower, tidied his room and put extra touches here and there to make it the more pleasant. And as Vic strode up or down the streets with his back as straight as a young sheepherder, his step reaching like a logger's, and as sure, women watched him on his way, some covertly and some with bold hope. But long ago there had been a girl—and Vic had been disappointed. Her name was Nancy—Nancy Cartvey. She had double-crossed him, run away with a man he had never seen, and now she was the wife of Ho-Jack Ripper, come to give him what she called "fair warning."

Vic just stood dazed. He had been only a boy when this woman—a woman then—had toyed with his affections. He had seen and recognized her long since, but she had seemed really to have forgotten him utterly. Now here she was—again! Vic stood there, his head swaying from side to side, his embarrassment like an old wound, which should have been fatal but hadn't, reopened by another blow.

"Oh, Vic!" She approached to rest her hands on his coat lapels. "Why didn't yo' go on yo' way? What made yo' stay near me like this? I done yo' dirt, Vic. But what'd yo' be such a fool for? Why'd yo' come out heah—giving up what yo' all might have be'n?"

"Why'd I quit?" he asked her bitterly. "Yo' ask *me* that?"

That made her flinch. She turned her face away, thinking. She would do that—think always.

"I come to give yo' fair warning," she repeated. "They'll kill yo' Vic! Go on some'r's else, Vic. Run away, won't yo'?"

"*Run away!*" he repeated. "Run away from any gang of scoundrels that ever lived! Nancy Cartvey! Vic Gaines run away?"

"Well," she said, thoughtfully, "yo' did it when yo' came out heah. Yo' left back home. Yo' feared the laugh they gave yo', 'count of my jilting yo'. Yo' quit the manhood yo' might have had—all account of—of just a flirting girl. 'Tain't the first time yo' ran away, then. No, indeed 'tain't. Quit yo' foolin', Vic. Pack yo' duds an' run again. They'll kill yo' if yo' don't. They're bad, all them, Ripper an'——"

"Yes!" Vic breathed. "I did run away once, Nancy. I run account of loneliness and hurt. I quit, too, but that wa'n't being afraid, Nancy. It was the fading of the white light of inspiration. The tucker gone out of my heart so's it had no force left. My hands, my arms stayed strong, Nancy—I'm a good carpenter; yes, indeed."

"Everybody likes yo', Vic," she whispered. "Forget me. Get yo' gone. They'll kill yo' if yo' don't!"

"You'd have me run from jeopardy?" he asked. "No. Never! I can't do that. I've courted it. Danger disappoints—like a woman, sometimes. But in the end, Nancy, danger does its duty."

"Vic Gaines!" she laughed at him in her familiar taunting way. "Yo' fool—to let one girl disappoint yo'—into that philosophy of life—hoping it'll do what yo' fear to do yo'se'f! Six foot plus of plumb foolishness, account of a girl who tricked yo'!"

"I was tricked once," he declared.

"An' no woman's goin' to trick yo' all again?" she asked him, laughing with gay chuckles in her throat, and then vehemently, "Please, Vic! Run away. I travel with a gang of scoundrels, now, but I don't want them to kill a man I think a lot of, if I don't love him. Ripper's bad, yo' know. Yo' cain't beat him, no, indeedy! He's plannin' to be shut of yo', even if he don't know about us."

"Run away from him?" Vic asked, still incredulous. "After all I went through?"

"Why, yes!" she exclaimed intensely, staring at his face, her eyes never so full f fire as then. "Yo' must, Vic! I—I on't want yo' killed up by him, no—no! He's the best man, yo' know——"

Vic Gaines stared in turn at her, his lance studying her features detail by de-ail; and an artist or a lover might have ound much profit in that close scrutiny. Vic blinked. A strong light hurts the eyes f a man.

"If I run away, what'll you think of me—then?" he asked quietly.

"Prob'ly—prob'ly that anyhow, you've ome sense," she retorted.

"Course. I know what you think of me," he sighed. "A man needs a sight more'n all that I've in me; theh's hurts which made me flinch, Nancy, and I've un away trying to leave them behind. True, running never helped me with them. But being killed—no! If I was really in anger—well, likely if they draw down on me and I know it, then I'll be scared up, ourse. I expect that. But till then I don't reckon I'm going to run. It hurt o see you again—but I don't run, even if I didn't know you were here when I came his way."

"Oh, Vic—I knew—you're a fool, Vic! I want yo' to go!"

He wavered. Anyone could persuade im to do any favor—almost. A woman, a child, anything in the world, it seemed. She saw him about to grant her favor. A iny smile, quick, taunting—satisfied—ashed on her face.

"I had Laura Naylor go down Hurry Avenue. I 'lowed yo'd be down theh. She's looking for you," she added. "She'd ought to be back by now."

"She went looking for me—on Hurry Avenue, Down!" he exclaimed. "She down—at this time of night!"

"That's so," Nancy Ripper said. "We'd etter go look."

CHAPTER IV

A WOMAN GIVES WARNING

LAURA NAYLOR hurried to the Sunflower Pool Room to ask for Vic Gaines. Vic had left some time since, going out the back way. Dan Wiggin didn't know where he had started for.

"Down Hurry Avenue?" she asked.

"He might," Wiggin shook his head. "He's just that reckless, Vic is. He'd go 'specially where 'tain't safe, you know, Miss Naylor."

"I know!" she gasped, and scurried on down the slope. Wiggin went to the door and saw her pass the Busy Corner, silhouetted for a moment in the yellow lights of the big Step Light Ladies Emporium of Amusement sign which Ripper kept blazing around the corner of his establishment.

Laura hesitated as she entered the shadows beyond. Along the sidewalks were hitching poles where too many saddle horses stood shivering in the raw wintry night wind left by careless cowboys who rode in from the outlying cattle range to assuage the ache of loneliness which attended their occupations. The wailing strains of music spurted out of the dark depths, some far and faint, some close by. The searcher turned to look this and that way. Where would Vic be going? She could not even guess, but shrill feminine laughter brought a cold chill to her cheeks.

Anxiously she took advantage of spurting beams of light, of half-shutter doors, of painted windows with holes in them, of peep holes which permitted her to look within those rank resorts where men sought liquor, dance partners and games of chance. Vic, she was sure, would be playing cards or roulette, keno—faro perhaps. She wondered just what gambling game he preferred, as though that would give her an insight to his character.

"A brave man likes to play with chance," she thought to herself, stopping before the dark exterior of Bat Duncon's Stormy Sweets. There were no glimpses to be stolen here of what or who was within. Bat Duncon knew his profession. Half his income came from satisfying curiosity. He let the patrons of his resort know that he didn't care to have any talk about it, so whispering, mysterious and baffling retorts met all inquiries.

Laura Naylor went on past Bat's and away down the line where the hovels of poverty and the ejections of the resorts eked their harsh waning years into oblivion. There she turned to go back. Vic wasn't in sight. The wide open places did not reveal him. He'd be the kind to go, if anywhere, to Bat Duncon's, where there'd be no gossip to annoy or humiliate him.

She stood in the darkness before the Stormy Sweets staring at it. She heard muffled the strains of good music. She was wise, in the meaning of the vernacular. Standing close against the walls with half columns, which marked the entrance, hiding her, she gave thought to the needs of the occasion, hesitating. And presently the door opened. Three came out and the moment of half light was followed by darkness. The three stood for a minute bracing against the wind coming down the line of the Lonesome Mountains, harrying loose dust in eddies toward the valley basin to the westward.

"If I was Vic Gaines I'd watch my step," a man's voice said in a low tone. "It's the second time he's butted in."

"He'll be took care of," a woman's voice declared confidently.

"And they won't give him a chance, either."

"If he knew beans, he'd leave town," the woman remarked, adding, "But he won't. They'll get 'im, one way or another."

"Le's go," one of the men suggested, and the three breasted into the gale up the grade.

When they had taken their departure, Laura stood irresolute. She had been five years in that life of hers, skirting the brims of tragedy on the frontier. The thrill of adventure came to her day after day; the close calls of admiration as she walked straight. Intuition protested against her thought to enter Bat Duncon's to try and find Vic Gaines. Instead, she reflected that her own savage attack on Jason Wicks unquestionably had laid her liable to the gang-vengeance below the Busy Corner. Ho-Jack Ripper would hate her, and Bat Duncon was Ho-Jack's crony.

"I'll be no fool," she decided, and with that decision came a better, safer way.

She went to police headquarters, and entering, found no one there; just the lights, the desk and the telephone instrument standing in its place beside the blotter. She caught this up, and having glanced into the telephone number book called Down 36.

"Howdy," a voice replied.

"Duncon there?" she inquired.

"Who wants Duncon?"

"Nobody would take him as a gift," she laughed, lightly. "But there's those who want to have Vic Gaines come up the line."

"Vic Gaines? What's that to do with me?"

"They say he's playing with Stormy Sweets tonight."

"Hell, no! Hold the wire an' I'll fin out."

Three minutes later the same voi growled into the wire:

"Say, you—who give you that bum ste Vic's in my place?"

"Nobody," a sweet voice replied. " just wanted to know. Good-by!"

LAURA NAYLOR hung up, slipped swiftly into the street, and hurried along the way, baffled. Where coul Vic be? She tried to find a policeman, returning to headquarters, but as she peered in she saw and heard Captain Reed talking into the telephone. She waited a moment, listening.

"I tell you, Bat, there ain't no wom talked from here. No!"

And then:

"Why, doggone, Central, I tell you just went after my cup of coffee and cakes. I wa'n't gone five minutes. Well, maybe ten-fifteen. Well, course——"

Laura Naylor swiftly withdrew at that. She was not averse to having men teased and puzzled by her mysterious self. She went back to the Sunflower Pool Room and found Wiggin about to lock up.

"Oh, you did get back, did you?" he asked. "Vic went by about ten minutes after you did. I reckon he's worse off'n ever, now."

"How so?" Laura asked.

"Why—" Wiggin's voice dropped to a low whisper. "Well, he's with Nancy Ripper. Ho-Jack's only just got spry again after Vic kicking him up that night. Arm an' arm they come down the line."

"Arm in arm!" Laura repeated. "They—they stopped here?"

"No. I seen him first under the light up there, but when I see he had a lady, course I didn't butt in."

"Of course. One wouldn't," she answered. "Well, I guess he's all right now."

Instantly she surmised that if Vic had been looking for herself, he would have gone first to Wiggin and heard she had been there. Instead, he had gone right on past—with Mrs. Ripper. So Laura in the feminine, intuitive way immediately jumped to the conclusion that Vic hadn't had her in mind at all—had in fact succumbed to the talismans of Nancy Ripper.

Whitefaced, accordingly, her lips pressed tight and turned crinkly and bluish, her eyes squinting and her mind all made up, she strode homeward to her room, where she buried her face in her pillow and by turns wept into it, and by other turns clutched and wrangled it angrily, bitterly.

And in the morning she prepared her toilet with extreme care, puffed and powdered, massaged and touched here and there till she was prettier than ever, and at the breakfast call she went down to eat early as usual. Vic Gaines was there, calm and quiet as usual. Oh, these deceitful men! Eating sausage, cakes, and drinking much more strong coffee than was good for any one.

Laura greeted them all with her flashing smile, ate with her accustomed appetite; no more and no less. And she was in every way the same as ever, except that whenever Vic looked at her she just didn't happen to see him. And when he waited in the hallway, she happened to vanish through the kitchen. And Vic, half an hour late for work that morning, did a furious feat of toil, grateful and buffaloed, both.

And Laura found she had more folios to copy that morning and that afternoon than in many a day. And work piled up on her so high that her customary determination to clean her desk every day kept her down town to lunch, down town to dinner, and then till midnight, when at last she could draw the roll over her office desk, calling it a day.

Attorney Hardley, for whom she performed this feat of extra perfect attention, every punctuation proper, every letter in its place, line and spaces right, happened to drop in as she indited at the lower left side "*Witnesses*" and he gazed at the duty performed.

"Miss Naylor—I'm grateful for this. I can save a lot having it tomorrow morning. But I didn't suppose——"

"I always try to leave my desk clean, you know," she smiled.

"Well, I appreciate it. I don't know—you'll forgive me—but I'm wondering if now you'd care to have something to eat, a tenderloin steak, a cup of tea?"

He hesitated, was rather nervous in his proposal—which told volumes about Laura Naylor's business relationships.

"Why, it'd be really kind of you," she declared, with a charming smile. "I'd be delighted!"

Whereupon he beamed. A midnight supper with Laura Naylor was a favor beyond estimate. When they were sitting in the Oriental Restaurant booth on opposite sides of a nook table, he sought to measure up to the occasion. While waiting for the steaks and fixings he tried to be interesting.

"I've been sitting in on a conference tonight," he told her in a low and confidential voice. "The way things are, business is being hurt here in Echoes. Hurry Avenue, Down's taking more'n it's share of the community's income, and at the same time Ripper and the rest are growling about their high taxes, trying to make out that paying graft ought to be figured in on his contributions to the good of the town. He says, too, that if it wasn't for his joint the town'd be dead. Huh! They keep on and they'll kill off the town. I have it pretty straight they've figured a plan to get Vic Gaines, f'r instance. Course, decent citizens wouldn't be satisfied with just an ordinary killing. They'll have to have a real adequate open-and-shut excuse. If they don't they're liable to be cleaned—and cleaned right. Vic's awful careless, but at the same time I like him. Real nice fellow!"

"How could they find a real excuse for murdering him?" Laura asked casually.

"You know, I've been wondering. Course, if they do kill him, it's likely to be done in the wrong way. Then he-uh—trouble'll be sure 'nough. They could likely have some no-'count do the business for a hundred dollars—and let him be strung up for it. But if it come to the pinch, they couldn't rely on that kind to keep mum. Whoever paid the money'd sure be in a right ticklish position. I don't know—the mayor's in favor of giving Vic a job as city marshal, or patrolman and sicking him on Hurry Avenue, Down. Well, course, Vic wouldn't last a week. They'd pot him from a second story window same as they killed three other cops and sent the rest to the hospital. Seems real careless, to me. They haven't any police protection whatever below the Busy Corner. Now that's what I call a disgrace! Look't what they did to Hubbard! They'd killed him right in broad daylight, if Vic hadn't happened to be along."

"They offered Vic the job once, didn't they?" Laura asked.

"Oh, yes. He turned it down, naturally. Vic's no fool. But I understand they're going to make a real serious attempt to have him accept tomorrow. There's some opposition, though. It developed sub rosa tonight. You see—uh-h—well, I don't know 'f I ought to mention it."

"You've mentioned it," Laura remarked. "Possibly I should know whether I ought to cut him dead or not. You see, he boards where I do on Whipsaw street. Mrs. Valer's real particular about her boarders."

"Why—uh—perhaps it isn't that bad. Vic's a good sort. It may be he's just been misled——"

"Yes?" softly. "You've said quite a lot——"

"Frankly, I'll tell you," the lawyer said. "A lawyer has to be something of a mixer you know. In some places they go to churches and teach in Sunday schools. In others—or the same—they probably belong to Elks, Masons, Knights and other organizations, and so on. Here in Echoes you go down to Bat Duncon's Stormy Sweets. You play a moderate game of poker, if you're wise. You drink coffee at midnight, or perhaps have a light lunch. It's the proper thing to do, y'understand. Personally, I'm not a gambler. And Bat's real particular about his place. It's real confidential. If you tell what you see there, and Bat hears about it, he's mad. Why, just a few weeks ago he spoke to one of our leading citizens—I'll tell you confidentially who it was: Mr. Tarkin."

"What—he——"

"Just as I told you. Everybody goes to Bat's! Last night Vic came in. I never saw him there before, but I reckon this was kind of a special occasion. Anyhow, there he was. And—" Hardley's voice dropped to the minimum of whispers—"who do you reckon was with him? I'd never guessed in a thousand years—Mrs. Nancy Ripper. Everybody in sight looked, swallowed violently, and immediately minded his or her own business. Lots of ladies go there. If you cared to—?"

"No—not tonight, anyhow."

"Well, anyhow, you remember a while back, that night they were fooling around, talking about hanging Cap'n Ganes of the police, account of the rumor that the boy he'd accidentally shot was dead? Ho-Jack Ripper was up front, like he would be, and Vic particularly picked on him, booting him and cracking ribs and sending him to the hospital for a week or two? Course, naturally, Nancy's right out in the open. Real friendly and popular. She's a great asset for Ho-Jack, being a good mixer, and a good sport. Same time—coming in with Vic thataway—huh!"

"They—they didn't stay?" Laura inquired.

"'Bout half an hour. Had a cup of coffee and a light lunch. She went over and talked to Bat a coupla minutes. He went upstairs and came back and they talked some more. Then she and Vic went out again. I happened to see them coming up the south side the avenue probably three quarters of an hour afterwards. They went into about every place along the way. And then he left her up the avenue where she turned on the street toward her house. I was just taking a walk myself——"

"An interesting one?" his listener inquired, slily, and he blinked.

"Good lawse—Miss Naylor! Don't breathe a word of it. Vic'd kill me. She'd kill me, sure as a hint went around that I'd even noticed a thing! My gracious, they'd be sensitive. You know that!"

"Do you suppose Vic Gaines'll take a job on the force if they really offer it to him again?" she changed the subject.

"He might's well. They'll kill him, anyhow, unless he travels soon and far."

The attorney was delighted when Laura Naylor allowed him to accompany her as far as Whipsaw Street, where they parted immediately. Laura went home to her room, where she sat for some time thinking things over.

She could but wonder at the news she had heard. Circumstances seemed implacable. And the human element was positively diabolical any way she could figure it out, or whatever way her intuition writhed. In the morning she started for breakfast five or six minutes earlier than usual, and as she left her room Vic Gaines was just coming by.

"Good morning," he greeted her.

"Good morning," she answered, and after a moment of hesitation she checked him to ask, "Vic, if they offer you that city marshal job again are you going to take it?"

"Why—they won't do that," he shook his head.

"You know—they're going to kill you if

they can. I mean below the Busy Corner."

"That's just talk."

"It's the talk all around—not much else talked about," she went on. "A lot of men have been killed in this county, you know. Please, Vic! Don't be a fool! If you don't go away—take care of yourself."

"If I don't go? D'you think they can run me out of the city?"

"They could trick you if you didn't look out. They could make a plant, find an excuse—and shoot you down in cold blood."

"What excuse?" he demanded.

"Oh, well; that's easy," she shrugged her shoulders. "They might make some woman one, for example."

Vic stared, astonished and uncomprehending.

CHAPTER V

VIC TAKES A NECK HOLD

VIC GAINES had finished the stage stable job and had gone over on the north side to put a glassed-in porch on the house of Banker Tarkin, whose wife had an idea she wanted a sunning parlor for her complexion. She generally received what she wanted, and now she took a lot of satisfaction bossing Vic Gaines to do the job just exactly according to her notion. As he worked there, that fourth day of the contract, the mayor and all three members of the police board came to see him.

"Mornin', Vic," the mayor greeted. "I see you're working, same as usual."

"Yes, sir," Vic admitted, and with a glance toward the house. "A bit more'n usual if anything."

The four newcomers nodded, mirthlessly. They could believe Vic's assertion.

"Reckon you know what we want, Vic?"

"Uh-h—probably not, gentlemen."

"Well, it's like this, you know," the mayor explained. " 'Cording to law, the State statutes, you can't carry a gun being just a private citizen. There's talk around you need to, though. We thought perhaps that you'd think a second time about that job we offered you—city marshal, with a free-roving commission, or patrolman on the police force under orders."

"Well—" Vic hesitated straightening with his square in one hand, his oval pencil in the other. He looked down over the city to the slight protuberance where Hurry Avenue, Down bulged like a goiter with Ripper's establishment, big, homely and garish, the chief eruption on the municipal landscape.

Fate had hunted Vic Gaines pretty steadily for a number of years. He had moved on a number of times, quietly and inconspicuously. When little things had portended approaching difficulty he had just naturally pulled his freight, plumb peacefully. He had never looked for trouble, leastwise not on his own account. Now and again it had been necessary to spank somebody. When Ho-Jack Ripper ran away with the girl he loved there had been a time when Vic would have done meanness, killing. Now the bitterness had gone out of his heart. He could even pass by the girl who had betrayed his affection and seem not to remember who she was. She had changed much, and was more fascinating than ever. It had been satisfaction to boot Ho-Jack down the street without mixing the woman in it.

Ho-Jack, the woman, somehow now faded in the perspective of his thoughts as he stared at Hurry Avenue, Down. They didn't amount to much, one way or another. He didn't know that any one person or any one idea had much bearing on the subject of his engrossment. He just knew that he had quit back yonder on account of Nancy. The day he turned to the left, packing his few needfuls to go away and abandon the career he might have had, tuckered out by his heart's disappointment, life had been for him pretty meager.

He couldn't go back to that old Missouri home town just now. He would be just moving on out of difficulty, running again. His high spirits at the thought of going away to escape the sure death wished on him by the Ripper crowd was just a veil of pretense. He had been running away for seven years. Now he fully estimated the actual fact. He hadn't been at peace with his soul. It was just pretending to be peaceable, avoiding what might be seriousness.

He turned to the city officials. He towered above them. He saw something in their eyes which appealed to him. Their bearing was one of respect, but their gaze contained something more than respect, the honor paid to a man who twice had performed feats of superior valor in the face of extreme jeopardy.

They personally needed him to help them there in Echoes. They were more than individuals. They represented the city. It dawned on Vic Gaines that he was needed by his fellow citizens. People had set him to work as a hired man, carpentering, which he could do with satisfactory skill and despatch. But a time had come when the whole community should have at its service the qualities which he possessed more than any other local man. His conscience clamored with the old emotion of unselfishness, the joy of going to the front and standing before the folk of different breed, with his brawn and courage to be a wall for their protection. Public spirit had never so clearly made itself conscious in Vic's mind.

"We'll give you a hundred and fifty a month, Vic," the mayor urged.

"That's big money, Mr. Mayor," Vic said, as though he had been figuring on mercenary terms, for he felt a bit ashamed at this streak of sentimentality in his make-up—the blamed feeling which made him blink back the water in his eyes when he was powerfully affected by some urgency of finer timber, like a sweet bit of music.

"Yes, sir," Vic nodded, "I can hardly refuse it."

"You're taking the job, Vic?" the mayor asked.

"I guess so. Yes, sir," Vic definitely answered, giving his word. "Course, I'll have to shape through this balcony first, but I'll turn it over to the glazier this evening."

"We'll swear you in now, Vic," the mayor said. "How big's your waist, Vic. For the belt, you know?"

"Why, thirty-two inches."

"You'll be city marshal. We'll have the badge and fixings at headquarters for you. Chief Manion'll be there. We won't say anything about this till you've buckled on your gun."

"If you'll excuse me," Vic said, uneasily, "the gun's all right. But if you don't mind, I wish you'd have the holster on the right hand. I want a stick about so long and about so big around, with a rawhide thong onto it 'bout two foot long. I'll have to tie it right length for my hand——"

"Good Lord, Vic!" the mayor exclaimed. "You don't aim to try using a club—on Hurry Avenue, Down!"

"If you beat a man up," Vic replied thoughtfully, "he's time and chance to brace up, behaving himself. When you shoot him dead he dies bad and stays bad, I expect. I hate to think of anybody never having a chance to come back."

"But—you know they'll never let you come up in clubbing reach, Vic!"

"They'll try not to, course," Vic admitted. "Same time, I aim to have something to do as to that, gentlemen. Anyhow, the way it is—well, every man ought to have the same chance I've had."

THE listeners puzzled, but did not argue. They were too pleased to have Vic assenting, to disagree with his methods. They went off down to the city hall and in an hour or two everyone had heard that Vic Gaines was to be city marshal. On Hurry Avenue, Down men literally licked their lips with anticipation. No one had been hung for killing the police of Echoes. These cops had just naturally looked for trouble, when they put on the city uniform and had to take their luck on the breaks. Naturally, it isn't the same thing, killing an officer of the law, as it is an innocent, peace-minding citizen. Not half so bad, account of the policeman or deputy or whatever knowing what'd happen when five or ten or twenty to one were the odds he faced.

Mrs. Tarkin was the first to express her opinion of Vic.

"So you've turned policeman!" she scorned him. "I suppose you're looking for a fight's the reason?"

"No'm," he replied, shaving a ribbon seven feet long from a door edge. "The fight's been looking for me a long time. Now it's caught up at last."

"You'll be killed."

"Yes'm. A man generally does get what he needs!"

Mrs. Tarkin caught her breath. Her husband seldom admitted that a man ever actually came to his just deserts, which was a moot point in the family. She could think of nothing to urge now, and Vic swiftly and excellently fitted the last frame in the sun-parlor balcony. He had never more patiently or beautifully performed a task, and on the stroke of five o'clock he set the last hinge fast.

Then, carrying his heavy tool box on his shoulder he headed for his boarding house. There he wiped off the beautiful chisels, augers, hammers and plane blades, using an oiled rag. The clink and rattle of his metals caught the ears of Laura Naylor when she came down the walk around the house to the kitchen door. She looked in on Vic, sitting in the woodshed. He did not notice her in his abstraction. He had changed his work again. He was putting away those up-building tools of industry to hang on weapons for destruction. He had turned from peace to violence.

"Vic!" Laura interrupted his uncomfortable reveries. "It isn't true. You haven't accepted the job of city marshal?"

He rolled his eyes up like a dog being scolded, caught in sucking eggs or running off with the supper steak. All over his expression and gesture admitted his guilt. Laura just looked at him with the unequaled eloquence of a thoroughly disgusted woman's eyes.

"You have!" she said bitterly. "You've let them buffalo you into it. I know what you want. You want trouble. You want to kill men legally!"

"Miss Naylor!" he gasped, flinching. "I—you don't—oh, well!"

Vic had grown weary of arguing with women. He hadn't ever disputed with one, of course. It was just his state of mind, the years on years in which he had run away and ducked, dodged, tried to excuse and explain, tried to find some justification for himself in his own mind, only to face the abject truth at last. No matter how badly a woman treated him, though she left him as Nancy had done, eternally tormented, he ought really to regard the abuse as a favor. For what could be a greater boon and compliment to a man than to have a woman pay enough attention to him even to torture him, heart and soul?

That was Vic Gaines all over. He cringed now, aware of a new disgust in another woman's mind. No wonder Laura Naylor despised him. She had only had a right to. She had a woman's reason for it, complete justification in her own mind, he was sure. And with his head hanging down, his eyes taking a sidelong glance at the sensible low ties and the pretty ankles of his accuser, he did not see the flash in her eyes nor the flickering smile of satisfaction on her lips.

Vic Gaines had come to the turning point in his life. And when he heard her teeth click at a recollection, his quick glance saw on her face only the expression that followed her memory of how simple minded, what a dupe he was—letting Nancy Ripper pave the way for another justifiable homicide in the eyes of the legal duplicities. She went on her way, then; and Vic turned the lock in his major tool chest and put the key upstairs in his desk. Probably it would be many a day before he would need it again—unless, perchance, the boarding house lady needed a new plank in the porch or had to have a brace put in a piece of furniture, odd jobs at which Vic was particularly resourceful and handy.

Vic went down to the city hall headquarters after supper. He found quite a crowd there to see with curiosity and wonder the buckling on of the best belt and fastest draw holster to be had. The local saddler had shaped a beautiful clip for a fine hickory stick, lashing a thong to it with proper lack of hole or creases which would have weakened the small timber.

Somebody would have passed the drinks around, only on second thought this seemed a bit off-color, being as Echoes was particularly dry, and Vic was now a law officer. The toast to his good luck—if any—would have to be drunk behind his back. And so having discarded his own three-inch wide belt for the new special one with its accouterments for real business above and beyond holding up his trousers, Vic remarked that it looked like a nice night, pretty fresh, but starlit—and glided from among his friends to vanish on the balls of his feet, silently.

For a long time the gathering in headquarters gazed at the doorway through which Vic had taken his departure. No one said a word. He had gone forth with an odd, quick alertness, yet none who saw him go anticipated anything in particular for a while.

Three other city officers had gone from that same headquarters through that very doorway—and in one case two weeks later, in another four weeks later, and in the third instance in less than two months, those cops were lying dead in the Blake & Stilwell Mortuary. In their minds' eyes the spectators saw Vic Gaines stretched in his silvery-gray casket, the best the city could buy; his long, slim hands across his breast, his gray eyes covered, and at the head a large horseshoe with an inscription "At Rest" done in flowers imported a thousand miles. Poor Vic!

The worst of it would be, probably, that some cowboy would do the meanness. Or it might be a part-time miner or tinhorn gambler. Or very likely no one would know for a year or two just who had let go the charge of buckshot at short range from behind Vic's back as he patroled up and down the avenue below the Busy Corner.

Nobody expected anything for a month or two. The Ripper gang would sure hesitate a week or month before tentatively starting anything. They'd have to be mighty sure of their plans, first. If they didn't look out, somebody might start something, and the decent citizens would get their dander up. Ripper and those who traveled with him were sharp, though. They'd find a way, given time!

There wasn't much to say. Some of the bystanders did some thinking, lighting cigarets or cigars and trying to think of an appropriate remark. Two or three were obviously uneasy, anxious to be going, one to see his sweetheart and another to listen to the burring of shuffled cards. Yet no one actually left police headquarters. None had time to start as a matter of fact, when some one with ears unusually acute, heard something—what, he didn't know. Possibly it wasn't really a sound, just something in the intense air.

Half a minute later there was another clearly defined sound and then ominous quiet. It came from around the Busy Corner and it was a part yell, part scream:

"Leggo my neck!"

Then there was a noise of many murmuring voices, many loud and excited exclamations. In headquarters there was a rush of several feet toward the door to look-see. They witnessed a spectacle amid the falling yellow rays from Ripper's big electric sign at the Busy Corner. A tall man with a wide gray hat was coming, and in front of him he was propelling at arm's length a smaller, rather chunky man.

"Why!" someone exclaimed in surprise. "It's Vic!"

"Already?" a number of voices exclaimed incredulously.

"He could, you know—under Section 144, the nuisance act," a witty attorney reminded the spectators.

"But—my gosh it's Bat Duncon!" a shrill voice proclaimed. "He's pulled Bat Duncon!"

VIC came with long strides, swiftly. Before him hopped and bobbed along the keeper of the Stormy Sweets, gambler specialist and proud of his hightonedness. Vic thrust Bat down the line of the corridor clear through to the open grating and empty cells of the city lockup. Bat went through into the remotest and darkest of the cells and the grate closed on him with a clang.

Vic returned to the police desk and opened up the blotter and looked till he found the first vacant page. There he took the big pen in hand and with swift, fine, beautiful script wrote:

December 4.

Bat Duncon, 44 years of age, white, no religion, No. 11 Hurry Avenue, Down, arrested by City Marshal Vic Gaines at 7:52 o'clock P. M.

Charge: Disorderly, drunk, using abusive language to a police officer, refusing to stop gaming on said premises at No. 11 Hurry Avenue, Down; maintaining a nuisance, to wit: said premises, known as the Stormy Sweets. Witnesses to the same:
Rocky Linderman
Archibald Jasper
Ed Winden
Hank Hogerth
Lester Vandome
Claude Akin
Robert Crendale
Mr. Tarkin

When he had glanced back over his entry Vic stood up, and giving his belt a proper hitch he started without a word through the doorway again.

The spectators had said nothing, made only slight and varied sounds which did not disturb anyone and in fact attracted almost no attention whatever. They noted a certain look of abstraction and attention to business in the thoughtfulness of Vic's countenance, and his stride had quite a snap to it. Otherwise they had nothing to think. Vic headed diagonally across the square toward the Busy Corner, and a group in the shadowy distance beyond withdrew swiftly as Vic approached. No one followed Vic.

The city marshal went on down Hurry Avenue out of sight. He was gone eleven minutes by the clock. He returned with two men and Mrs. Clayfoot. Jerry Wessley and Bob Luckner had misbehaved, it appeared, under City Ordinance Section No. 144. They looked dazed, on their way to cells. Mrs. Clayfoot was weeping. She was, it appeared, a witness who needed detention.

A crowd had followed Vic and his second raid. When he emerged the little mob hastily withdrew, scattering. A few squawls, a few yips were the extent of the comment on Vic's activity. As he went back to his task, cowboys rode away on their horses while miners came streaming out into the side streets real early on their way home. The cafés and restaurants above the Busy Corner filled rapidly as the exodus continued from Hurry Avenue, Down.

When, out of curiosity, some of the headquarters group went over to look into the raided thoroughfare they saw that certain lights no longer burned. The bright yellow outthrusts of light, like open jaws above and below the swinging half-doors, were gone. Only the dim street lamps burned beyond Ripper's group of buildings. The large Step Light Ladies Emporium of promiscuous amusements still displayed its bright, corner-lighted sign and within the music had not ceased to play.

Vic had not interfered with Ripper's place. He had closed Bat Duncon's, however, and that was a big night's work. Bat shouted and cursed from his cell but no one had gone back to him. No one could, for Vic had locked the outer grating and carried away the key. The city recorder and county judge who had been present disappeared before anyone appealed to them for grant of bail. Bat had been pretty uppity. A night in jail might do him good, for a fact. Course after this there'd be some decent restraint down the avenue. Bat and his had been too high-handed, that's all.

Vic brought in no more prisoners. He had made some trial cases possible. He was lauded for his self-restraint. But as the Ripper lights continued to burn, a doubt arose, one industriously fostered. Vic was playing a favorite, sure enough. There was a reason, too—if one could believe his eyes and what one heard.

"Huh!" someone said, without too much noise. "There never is any big trouble 'thout theh's a woman into it some'r's. Kinda secondary, course, but right contributary."

"That's so!" several assented. "Well, it comes out in the wash."

CHAPTER VI

BUSHWHACKED

BAT DUNCON didn't want to plead guilty to the charge of permitting gambling on his premises and refusing to stop the same. As to being drunk, disorderly and abusive, that was also a matter of viewpoint. Only the list of witnesses to be summoned, in case Bat forced a trial on the various accusations, brought on Bat the grim fact that he must himself take care of his friends and patrons. Vic Gaines had invaded the sanctuary of vicious practices and he had been put on the force to bring reasonableness below the Busy Corner. Whether Bat and his cronies wanted a cop to patrol a beat past their dens made no difference. Vic was patroling.

Every town on the frontier, every camp and trading place, had faced that problem of the dividing line between reputable business and vice in all its forms. The original settlers commonly included among themselves a majority of fugitives from justice and rowdies who objected to the restrictions imposed by the increasing laws to protect the rights and restrain the wrongs of humans.

Now Echoes grappled with the problem. Up town confronted down town. Repeatedly the murder or crippling of hired peacemakers had left the law-and-order element with the insistent demand that they mind their own business, letting Ripper and his allies be.

Other cops, bullies, had gone like Vic Gaines down to take the measure of the district of shadows. And they in their turns had one by one been measured for their boxes for planting on the round knob south of town where the dead came to eternal repose. And Vic had no sooner forced the issue with cunning, compelling Bat Duncon to plead guilty and take his fifty days less one in the jail, than the wrath of the netherworld surged with baffled red anger against the grim restraint so stoutly imposed on them. At the same time Vic must have known his success made inevitable the personal attack which instantly came—the swift running tide of gossip, the innuendo and accusation which always hit their marks.

Vic Gaines had been down the line with Nancy Ripper, Ho-Jack Ripper's wife; and now Vic hadn't even looked into the biggest business of all from the Busy Corner down. What method was this? Had Ho-Jack doubled-crossed his associates, somehow? Bat Duncon had been sentenced to jail, and by day he reposed in sleep in the cell assigned him. But after nightfall, Bat's grate-bars mysteriously swung back so that he could slip shadow-wise down to the Stormy Sweets. That front door, past which Vic Gaines frequently patroled, was now tightly locked. But other entrances, obscure and hidden, were known to those Bat deigned to trust and mulct.

Bat did not go see Ho-Jack Ripper. The slight stirred the leading shade of the town. Ripper could not understand why he was covertly neglected by his followers. The satisfaction he felt because the wild marshal had left his own place undisturbed came strictly from the idea that Vic was afraid to assail the biggest of them all. Ripper went down to Bat's, therefore, to have it out with him.

He found Bat squatted back in his green room, his eyelids lowering, his face unsmiling, his manner a surly demand:

"Well, what do y' want?"

Ripper with difficulty restrained his hot temper. A fighting man, he didn't take such sullen demeanor with patience. Yet now he was conscious that somehow the men who had looked up to him were now looking down on him. The passive indifference of all the bystanders and spectators was not to be ignored.

"What is it, Bat?" he demanded. "What ails you all?"

Bat was in no mood to lie. At the same time, to tell the truth meant Ripper's instant going for his gun. Everyone realized that, now. Vic Gaines playing of a favorite was the proof of something—of what, no one could make a good guess, even. They all knew that Vic had gone at midnight with Nancy Ripper down the line—in and out of every place which he had raided. Perhaps it was Ripper's own scheme to get shut of competition. Ho-Jack was just bad enough to think of a thing like that—and to let Vic do the dirty work in Ho-Jack's favor. Besides, every one knew that Nancy was Ho-Jack's cunning brain.

There's always a woman somewhere. But where, was the question? Any slightest hint, no matter in what direction, meant that Ho-Jack Ripper, sensitive soul that he was, would kill another man and more firmly establish himself as a heart of honor and bully of the dens. So Bat Duncon hesitated to bring on his own head the wrath to come. Ripper faced the repugnance, stood in the silence checked by the refusal to say aye or no. What to do he could not think. Bat's games were running, even though not the same as usual. Citizens at large were present, but not the certain particular leading ones. The Stormy Sweets, having gone into a hurricane, now was shaken by the tumult of aftermath within the wreckage. If Vic came again he might be even more violent. People were not anxious to be the object of that violence. Bat's was no longer a social place of prestige.

So Ho-Jack Ripper stood like a wounded beast of prey, hurt but not able to tell whence the wound had come, what had given it. All he wanted, now, was a good object for his wrath, just to show what he felt. Not a whisper had reached him to indicate the reason for the sudden turn against him. Worse yet, he was sensitive to sentiment. Instead of admiration for his burly powers and prowess he knew that now a certain degree of contempt rested on him, as though he were despicable. A snarl grew sibilant on his lips. He stirred in feline rage looking about for an appropriate victim of his wrath.

NANCY RIPPER missed Ho-Jack, so she asked where he was when she came in late from her home. Someone told her he had gone down to Bat's. She followed swiftly, coming in just as Ho-Jack's lips were lifting in one of his most murderous of moods! She recognized the symptoms. A glance around revealed to her feminine intuition something of the situation. She read the covert glances leveled at her. She whitened perceptibly as she turned to study her husband. His eyes softened as he looked at hers. It chanced that as he hated those others around he regarded Nancy with great momentary affection. She'd come to stand by him.

Nancy read the thought in his expression. She smiled ever so slightly, while the next instant she flared a warning to Bat and all of his. They'd better mind their own business.

They did, too. Not one word, not even a glance. Eyes turned down to avoid her own. Nancy took Ho-Jack by the arm and led him away. To the frozen observers, he seemed to wilt at her touch. The two returned to the Ripper establishment by the back way. Nancy soothed Ho-Jack's overwrought nerves with liquor which he seemed to need. Then she persuaded him, somehow, to go upstairs to sleep. Before she left the building she warned the night manager, Tim Guthrie, not to let him out till he was over that murderous, dejected wrath, to spells of which he was subjected.

Then Nancy Ripper went to find out just exactly what was aching Hurry Avenue, Down. She had missed bets, she realized. She had to know what was going on, what ailed everybody. This was easy. Within half an hour dance hall girls and a dance hall piano player had tipped her off. If Ripper's establishment had been closed with the rest no one would have thought of anything but how to get rid of Vic Gaines. As it was, Ripper was favored. And as she was such a good friend of Vic's she ought to know why!

Whereupon she went looking for Vic, wondering in her own limited way, why and if, startled and tremulous. If she had that much influence over Vic, why, then—What then? She went down the avenue in the dark. She circled up alleys and across the streets. Sharp eyes of alley rats saw her scurrying along. In her eager anxiety she failed to notice the observation to which she was subjected, did not see the furtive pursuit of shadows. For once, and almost fatally, her vigilance was relaxed.

She found Vic sitting on a stool in the Chink restaurant kitchen, drinking a cup of hot tea-flower steep. Instantly he asked the Chinaman, as a favor, to serve her with such another as his own. She sat, nonplused as she sipped, staring at Gaines without a word.

"Vic," she asked presently, "you're a fool."

"I know it," he admitted humbly.

"You've let our place—Ho-Jack's place—alone——"

He gave her no sign, just gazing at her.

"Why did you?" she presently asked, intensely, in a low voice.

For the life of him he could think of no answer. He shook his head in his doubt. He didn't know the answer. Dimly he had been conscious of playing a kind of strategy, though to what purpose he did not even try to guess. To have his recreant sweetheart of old ask an explanation left him numb, speechless. Yet her demand made his mind clearer than it had been.

"You know what it's doing," she declared angrily. "It's spoiling your reputation. Everybody thinks Ho-Jack's bought you off."

"Do they?" he asked in turn.

"Or else they think—" she stopped short, shocked by the revelation of her own keen apprehension.

"Oh, you fool!" she whispered. "You didn't—on *my* account?"

He shook his head. And she was furious at his denial. She could have excused anything had his gesture been assent. As it was he was unforgivable. But she knew. now, the game Vic played, not knowing how good and successful it was.

Vic's strategy, or whatever it was, had split his opponents. He had divided them into two factions. He had done the one thing which gave him a chance of making a real clean-up, whether he had done it with intention or by accident. For one thing, Ripper's place had been managed, bad though it was, on a higher plane. It was a less obviously vicious establishment than any other. And Vic had felt the difficulty he would have in making out a case against Ho-Jack.

"And I 'lowed yo' were a fool!" the woman suddenly changed her attitude. "Lawse—what tricky game is this yo' playing? I b'lieve yo' meant doin' what yo've done."

Still he refused to admit whatever she was talking about, hinting and declaring.

"Vic," she hesitated, "they've gone so mad down Hurry Avenue I'm afraid they—Lots don't like me. I don't know what they might do. I'm going home— I'm alone. Ho-Jack's drunk again tonight. You're a policeman. Won't you see me safely home?"

"Why—course, Nancy," he assented, dubiously.

Accordingly, on his arm and up the devious alleyways, she went under his protection to the empty Ripper home cabin, where he stood by until lights within assured him that all was well. Then he turned to go back down town to resume, or rather continue, his beat. He had gone only a few steps when suddenly there was a fusillade of several shots. They came from behind him, over to one side where a board fence around a cabin hid the bushwhackers.

Instantly he stumbled forward and then he turned and rushed at the red flashes in the gloom where black powder cartridges were exploding. Vic Gaines had run into an ambush at last. In the dark night it had been hard to aim. And it was still harder to do so when he came charging and leaping at the hiding place, throwing bullets of his own into it.

Three or four men, possibly five, had covered him, but he returned their fire with the hard accuracy of a man whose hand does not quiver and which obeys his will with the precision of long practice. Vic drove his own slugs through the boards of the fence, and when he reached it two men were lying where his bullets had killed them. A third was scrambling and limping away. Other tracks might or might not mean a fourth participant.

Forty or fifty shots in the night, all in one locality, aroused everyone for half a mile around. Then when silence fell, slow-footed investigators came peering and peeking, stretching their necks and fighting their nervousness and doubts with their increasing curiosity. They found Vic Gaines first. He was slumped partly over the board fence, where his belt had hooked over the sharp top of a post when he collapsed unconscious.

They found Dan Balene and Root Douglas lying dead. Bloody tracks in a scuffled trail led down the back streets and disappeared at last near the courthouse square. When Vic was carried to the city hospital they found he had been hit through the right shoulder, from the back through the front, with a rifle bullet believed to be a .38-55 from the clean drive through. But no rifle, and no .38 revolver either, was found.

When day came, with most of the populace up and around with excitement in their minds on account of the strange circumstances, a discovery was made. Bat Duncon was no longer in his jail cell. The grate was found swinging open, as was also the corridor grating and the steel outside door. Apparently Bat had made his getaway, but two days later he was brought into the hospital on a stretcher. He had been shot in the side and the wound had gone bad on him for lack of proper attention. To save his life he went to the hospital where he claimed that the wound was due to an accident. He had dropped his .45 revolver while cleaning it; and the hammer, hitting a marble dresser top, exploded a shell just right to drive the bullet clear through him above the hip. He stuck to his story, naturally. He apologized for having been out of jail, too, which was nice of him.

And by this time everybody knew in strict confidence that Vic Gaines had been shot after accompanying Mrs. Nancy Ripper home, while her husband, Ho-Jack Ripper was sleeping off the liquor he had drunk after having received so little satisfaction from Bat Duncon in the Stormy Sweets.

Ho-Jack learned of the rumor when he read the *Echoes Recorder* account of the shooting of the "popular City Marshal" from ambush when he was "in the act of seeing a lady home after she had appealed to him for protection." By way of explaining the desire of anyone for protection in the beautiful and progressive city of Echoes it was said that "she had reason to believe that certain of her husband's bad friends below the Busy Corner had been making covert, insulting insinuations, and she was worried lest perchance enemies might wreak their spleen out on her." Mrs. Ripper had gone to the editor of the *Recorder* and told him the truth, and begged him to use his discretion in the matter.

Ho-Jack Ripper, as the shooting had been diagonally across the street from his own cabin home, needed no further information. He knew now what his associates and the whole town were talking about. Vic Gaines hadn't been afraid of Ho-Jack. Far from it! He had just not interfered with Ho-Jack's wife's husband's business.

And that called for condign action on the part of the husband.

CHAPTER VII

A DIVEKEEPER BRAVELY QUITS

RIPPER'S Emporium of Amusement still remained flaring at the Busy Corner of Echoes. Ho-Jack Ripper didn't go to sleep days in his cabin up town. Neither did Nancy Ripper come down of nights to advise her husband about details of tact and management. Without the handsome woman to set the pace on the dance floor and to bet with abandon on the games in the green room when the play slackened, a certain lassitude, dullness, fell on the establishment.

Every day the bulletins about Vic Gaines condition were passed around. Steadily he was improving. He had a great many visitors. Flowers were brought in by telegraph, saying whatever flowers talk about. Nothing had been decided in Echoes as to how far the establishments could go on Hurry Avenue, Down. Nobody was in haste to resume operations on the previous scale, in view of the rising popular sentiment.

Bat Duncon was naturally the one to set the pace, and Bat was recovering much more slowly than Vic Gaines, having thinner blood and a meaner disposition. Vic grew impatient with nurses and doctors, and covertly worked his injured shoulder, finding out how stiff, if any, it was going to be. He was right handed, and he knew he'd need to be slick and smooth for what was coming.

Vic had performed his duties as a policeman, and as city marshal his record was regarded straight and square. A certain reservation was made, however, on the score of his private life. Mrs. Nancy Ripper had found loneliness in the circumstances hard to bear. She had never been anybody up town. Now she couldn't go down town, either, for the code there was drawn sharply against double-crossers. The woman was right handsome to look at, bright too, but who could trust her? Course, it was easy to blame the woman. That's instinctive. Everybody knows where the blame belongs when trouble breaks, yes, indeed! Folks are sorry for the dupes, who are men—huh!

People feared that violence might hurt business in Echoes. Instead, the uncertainty quickened it. Anybody was liable to see something never to be forgotten if luck favored, perhaps right there in the courthouse square. Vic Gaines was getting well, fast. And Ho-Jack Ripper, boss of the one wide-open place in town, grimaced with dissatisfaction and suspicion, hurt pride and boiling anger every time he thought of his exemption.

He had been a busy man, not very bright and with a poor memory for names. When he ran away with Nancy he hadn't bothered to remember the name of her betrayed sweetheart. Now he knew that Vic Gaines was his victim. And now it was Vic's turn about in the fair play game of the world.

Ho-Jack drank more than ever, morose, sullen, silent, waiting for Vic Gaines to come forth well again. He choked with rage when he thought of Nancy; choked, too, with loneliness and helplessness. If he hadn't been too proud and doubtful, afraid of what would be said, he'd have gone up to his cabin to tell Nancy it was all right. He cared; but it was all right, just the same. He hadn't treated her right, lots of times. She was a woman. And women are always better than men, anyhow. He missed the woman he had stolen away. He wanted her back, and he didn't know how to go about getting her to let him hang around. All he could think was to send her whole wads of treasury certificates and hope she'd take them kindly, account of his owing her support, anyhow.

And when he had done something like this, he would take a horse and go riding out to practice with his revolvers, both hands, making ready. He was going to kill Vic Gaines. He had an excuse, now. He could go into any court, and plead the unwritten law, couldn't he? And he knew his plea was a lie to come. Nancy was on the level, he knew. Lies had never bothered him before. Now he winced, thinking he was going to justify murder on the ground of his wife's disgrace. Just so!

At the same time he was obliged to do it that way. If he didn't kill Vic Gaines everybody would talk. And talking would be fatal to the peace of Ho-Jack Ripper. He had his pride, and Nancy Ripper was it! At the same time—there was wrong in it. Why had Nancy put herself in the way of all this rough stuff? If he could only figure that out . . .

Vic Gaines was getting well. He'd leave

the hospital next week. Bat Duncon wouldn't be out for two months. And he'd always be a cripple where Vic had lammed him one with a .45—after being shot in the back! And now Ho-Jack must kill Vic. He'd be able to do it, under the universal unwritten law. The break is always right in cases like that. And then Ho-Jack could settle down and make a stake big enough to retire on, and go back East to Missouri. By that time Nancy'd be peaceable again, and they'd be happy in their old age. That is, if Nancy—well—had any sense at all. Ho-Jack prided himself on knowing women, generally; but of course, sometimes and particularly he had his doubts, so to speak.

Vic went home. He walked, but wobbled a bit on the way. He went up and down stairs in the boarding house, spryer and spryer. He'd be back on duty in another week. When the *Echoes Recorder* reporter asked him what plans he had as city marshal, he said he hadn't any.

"All a policeman has to do is take things as they come, and shape them according to the law," Vic said, which was philosophy.

AND SO on the first of the month, Vic came down town to headquarters, talked a while with the police chief and some friends who knew he was coming on duty that night. Then he went outside, standing for a few minutes over in the shadow looking out on the scene of his duties. Across the square, at the Busy Corner glared the light of Ripper's illuminated bid for patronage.

Vic regarded that light morosely. What had restrained him from going there first, and setting for all time the hard feelings between him and Ho-Jack Ripper was as inexplicable to Vic as ever. He knew, of course, that there had been a little return of the backwash into the district down the avenue from Ho-Jack's place, but it was only trifling; sneaky and frightened keepers of resorts who would cover up and run the moment Vic said "Boo-o!"

But Ho-Jack was different. Merriment there had never been that bad. Now it was wide open, with gambling, drinking, dancing to wild music. The tact and restraint of Nancy Ripper no longer gave a certain restraint and savor to the amusements there. She had known the loneliness and the weariness of the men who attended those scenes. Mostly they were not bad, were not vicious—were just poor devils who wanted the false warmth of liquor for lack of the real inspiration of success. Or they wanted the excitement of taking a chance with their money for lack of real adventure and the courage of high spirits. Or they were hungry for a woman's good humor, her kindness, the attention of her rare self—and were grateful that even to the least of them would be given a light word or a caress. Without the guiding genius of Nancy Ripper, the place offered now no kindliness nor appreciation, nothing but the pay and take, in which entered no fervor of gift or gaiety.

Ho-Jack's was bad, now. The condition was plainly to be understood, if compared with former days when Nancy Ripper had been good natured. Vic Gaines had felt then the difficulty of making out a case against Ho-Jack and his place. Now the establishment was a raw wound on the morals of the community—which didn't exactly know what the difference was.

Vic Gaines duty was before him. Over and over again word had come to him in the hospital about what was going on in Ho-Jack's. He had his task to perform as a city marshal. On the other side was the proprietor of the dive. And that man, if and when he killed Vic Gaines, would come clear of the charge of murder—unquestionably. The facts were provable, far enough for justification. It was even known that Nancy had been stolen from Vic on her own volition. It might even be that she would go on the stand to save the man of her choice from the scaffold. Women do that!

The officer of the law, in the performance of his duty, cut across the courthouse square. It was not Vic's habit to wait and dodge around. He worked with a kind of noble impatience, eager to have whatever was at hand, done with and settled. As a carpenter he had worked swiftly, with enthusiasm. And as city marshal he had been equally impetuous, at least.

He headed for the entrance under the sign which was a half circle around the corner of the building. He knew he was weak, slow, hampered by the wasted tissues in his shoulders. At the same time this equalized the odds—his own spirit against Ho-Jack Ripper's sturdy frame, with whatever dissipation had done to it.

Fair warning of a fair fight had been given. On its result would depend, as always along the border, whether viciousness should have a longer lease or if the law-abiding should lift the community to a higher level, a finer status of practice.

Vic brushed aside the facts of his own errors. He knew now that Nancy Ripper had inveigled him. Of her motive he could make no estimate. She had given him by her actions an odd, slightest of hints that she had made a mistake fatal to her happiness when she abandoned him for the debonair gambler passer-by. But she had been plausible, too. And he knew that when he was shot by the bushwhackers it had been fortuitous circumstance which took him into that peril alone. Nancy Ripper had led him around a back way to the cabin. Had they gone straight to her door, they must have gone into the shooting together.

Ho-Jack Ripper was waiting over at the bar. He stood there alone, mid-way down the length of the dark hardwood. A single bottle and one glass stood at his elbow as he watched the entrance to the blind-tiger room, around a corner from the main entrance. He had given the word that when Vic asked, he should be told where to find the proprietor. And the door-keeper with unsteady voice and jerking eyes obeyed the injunction.

Vic swung softly on the balls of his feet, his long arms and hospital-white hands swinging free. On his right hip was his revolver, on the other side was his pale, oiled club. The sweep of his eyes was merely habitual. In that moment he trusted his life against the things he knew about Ho-Jack Ripper. The gambler could not afford—not even to save his life—to take an unfair advantage, like shooting Vic from some peep-hole. He'd be hung within the hour if he did that.

So Vic came into full view at the double-doorway of the barroom and stood in a light no more brilliant than that in which Ho-Jack was standing. The law had to intervene at last. That was the only weight in the balance which was more than personal.

Two men had come together after many years to settle an account which had been accumulative. Vic did not pause. He took two steps over the threshold of the double-doors heading straight for the man he was after, to arrest him for disorderly conduct, maintaining a nuisance. That trivial charge was the final incentive to bring them together.

Ho-Jack went for his gun. Witnesses frozen at the little round tables hardly saw that amazing flash of a human hand, nearly invisible in its quickness. They saw his gun come forth with the muzzle lifting forward, circling up as if in a sling. And then the straight, true curve was broken with a slight wabble, a certain dubiousness of purpose. And at that instant of hesitation, Vic's revolver spoke with a terrible throb in that closed space.

AMONG the witnesses were connoisseurs of gun play and every one of these agreed that Ho-Jack beat Vic Gaines to the draw. They declared that had he pulled the trigger on the instant, Vic Gaines would have been hit plumb center. Vic was clumsy of arm and dead slow on the draw. He had, however, shot straight and Ho-Jack collapsed where he still leaned negligently against the bar, killed by a bullet in the heart. For an instant he hung there and then slid like a rag onto the brass rail beneath.

On the instant Vic Gaines uttered a low cry, an inarticulate exclamation of feeling, it's meaning doubtful and subject of much debate and criticism, curiosity and wonderment. Gazing at his victim he was fascinated by the regret of his success. And then he snapped out of his momentary paralysis to continue the duty of which the killing was the incidental chief necessity.

He ordered the bar of the blind tiger closed, and the liquor dumped. In the green room he stopped the illicit playing with money on the tables in sight. When he went to the big dance hall he found the throng standing about tense with excitement. He addressed the floor manager in low tones and a few emphatic demands for certain modifications of doings there to conform with the city and State ordinances, made and provided. All this meant that the authorities had taken control with unshakable grip. Gang rule had ended below the Busy Corner. And the new proprietor, Mrs. Nancy Ripper, would doubtless even fall far short of the permissible limits.

Ho-Jack's body was carried to the Blake & Stilwell Mortuary. Vic quietly went over to the Chinese restaurant, gulped a black coffee and there, Laura Naylor found him. He shuddered. He fairly sobbed as he caught her hand in his, twisting his shoulders to lift his face from that pose of horror-stricken dejection.

"Laura!" he whispered. "He let me kill him. Why did he do it?"

"What?" she asked. "He *let* you?"

"Yes. I drew and pulled—but I was dead-slow. He had me—and let me go! How come he did that, Laura?"

She gazed steadily at him for a moment which seemed long indeed. Then she answered:

"I don't know, Vic," she shook her head. "There's only one person who might know. Perhaps——"

"Who do you mean?" he asked, when she ceased.

"Nancy—his wife," she suggested. "Perhaps we—you'd better go tell her about it."

"Face her!" Vic shuddered, and then in the way of a man who begins to understand the meaning of things, including the way of a woman, he nodded and rose to his feet. "All right—if you think I'd better. I don't know 'f you'd care to go with me. I'd take it kindly."

"I'll go," Laura assented without cavil. "She's home."

SO THEY went together back up to the cabin where the Rippers had lived daytimes. Nancy Ripper came to the door at their hail from the gate. They entered on her bidding. Her face, chalky white, did not change as she bade them be seated. Not sorrow but fury had blanched those cheeks. Vengeance satisfied was in the squinting glow of her terrible eyes.

"Vic," she began, "I want to thank——"

With a gesture the man checked her.

"No, Nancy!" he shook his head. "It wasn't me. I came to tell you—something. Ho-Jack beat me to the draw. He had me covered and I looked square along the barrel—but he didn't pull. 'Twa'n't for long, course. Probably it might have been a second. I couldn't tell. I just knew he had me, heart and eye, as I looked down that muzzle. I couldn't stop; I hadn't time for that. I tried to, understand; but before I could change the order to my finger, I'd let go. He'd waited there half an hour. It wasn't to kill me, Nancy. It was to be killed. And if I'd known that!"

Nancy Ripper's pretty chin lowered as her lips parted. Her cheeks colored. Her eyes filled with tears. She struggled with her emotions, but burst at last into deep sobs of terrible sorrow. Yet presently she mastered her feelings.

She raised her face proudly. She surveyed the two who had come to her, the one who had been her girlhood sweetheart, the other the woman who had restored his affection and trust again.

"Vic," she said. "Oh—thank you for telling me! You can forgive me now, I know! Ho-Jack was like that, you know Wild, course—bad naturally. He could be hateful, mean. He'd abused me. But, oh Vic, you can see now how come I could hurt you and run away with him! An' I can go down, now, to cry beside him. It wouldn't have been fitten for me not to do it. I was bitter, though. I could have killed him myse'f. Likely I did, in a way. But he was my kind. I can forgive him now for I understand him, myse'f."

She caught up her thick fur cloak and hurried swiftly down to the mortuary. Vic walked with Laura over to the boarding house. He was puzzled, quiet.

"What'd she mean, Laura," he asked at last, "saying she'd killed him likely, in a way? And saying she'd forgive him now?"

"Why—" Laura hesitated. "I was wondering about that myself. Probably her nerves are overwrought. They would be, you know. When a woman's lost her husband, she'd just talk. Vic, she's a wonderful woman. I think perhaps he'd hurt her, cheated her. She'd be bitter for that!"

"Why, yes," he admitted reluctantly. "But she's no patch to you. You—you're all I once thought she was. More, too, prob'ly."

"Think so?" she laughed. "Perhaps—I don't know."

Vic sighed. Anyhow, he'd cleaned Hurry Avenue, Down.

The RED RAG

And the Way of the Northwest Mounted

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

THE trail was fresher now, Mitchell was sure of that. And Constable Mitchell had worn the scarlet tunic of the Mounted Police long enough to be something of an authority on trails. Joe Theoret was not far ahead.

"Get your bellies down, boys!" he called to his string of tawny huskies. "You're wearing him down fast!" There was a ring to his voice that caused the dogs to prick up their wolfish ears and shove just a little harder still on their collars. Mitchell loved these five faithful companions of many a lonesome trail, and in their savage, husky way, they loved their master. Which is not to say that when in the right mood any one of them would not have torn Mitchell's throat out, given the chance.

The policeman took his eyes from the trail ahead long enough to glance thoughtfully around at the sky. It was laden with the threat of snow, and the wind was keen, with that peculiar quality of freshness that is a sure sign of storm in the snow country.

"Just my luck to have a nice little blizzard come up and wipe out the trail just as I get within striking distance," thought Mitchell. "That'll mean a week, maybe two weeks, delay, circling around picking up the trail again.

"That storm's due to break late this afternoon, I'd say. There's just a bare chance I can catch up before then. Worth trying, anyway!" And his whip cracked suggestively, something less than an inch from the lead dog's ear.

Mitchell stopped that noon just long enough to heat a gulp or two of tea, and thaw out some frozen boiled rice. Then, paying not the slightest heed to the growling protests of his dogs, he took up the trail.

The trail was growing fresher every hour, and Mitchell pushed his dogs mercilessly, one eye on the trail and the other on the weather. It was a race against time, with the odds against him; but there was a streak of Scotch stubbornness in Mitchell somewhere, and quite a lot of fighting Irish. That makes a pretty good combination for a Mounty.

There was a very good probability that Theoret would realize he was hard pressed, double back on his trail, and take a pot shot at the policeman from ambush. Many a Mounty has gone on the long trail in just such fashion. Mitchell kept a sharp lookout for any sign of lurking danger, but trusted more to his luck and to the breed's poor marksmanship than anything else. It was just a chance to take, as he had taken it a hundred times before.

It was late in the afternoon when he first sighted his quarry. As he topped a gentle rise that overlooked some great, unnamed lake, he saw a black speck moving along the opposite shore. Mitchell hastily whipped out his glasses and brought them to bear. The distant shore line leaped towards him through the magic of the big eight-power binoculars, and for perhaps thirty seconds Mitchell studied the scene.

The black speck was plainly Theoret and his team; Mitchell recognized the breed's parti-colored *koulatang,* or parka, and noted with satisfaction, that he was using his whip incessantly on his dogs, in spite of which treatment they refused to budge out of a weary, stubborn trot.

Mitchell replaced the glasses with a grim smile of satisfaction, and glanced up once more at the sky.

"Mush along, Sock!" he called to his lead dog. "We'll have the bracelets on him before the storm breaks, or you haven't got the stuff in you I think!" He emphasized his words with a rapid crackle of his whip, the lash snapping almost in the ear of every dog in the team, in rapid rotation. With their wolves' eyes, they too had seen the speck that moved on the distant shore, and instinct and experience told them the end of the trail was near.

"Damned old bloodhounds!" grinned Mitchell affectionately as they started out at a racing pace that many a fresh team would have found hard to beat. "Huskies always have a sprint or two left in their mangy hides. Go get him, pups!"

MITCHELL gained visibly during the next half hour. Theoret saw him, and sent a couple of shots back along the trail, but they were not even close.

"You'd save yourself trouble by stopping now, Joe," chuckled Mitchell. "Why on earth you fellows make such a last desperate spurt when you haven't a chance in the world is more than I could ever figure out; instinct, I suppose. Like a rabbit when it sees the dogs hot on the trail. Only the rabbit has a chance!"

Only three or four hundred yards ahead, Theoret and his team swung around a wooded point that projected out into the lake, the breed urging on his dogs with hoarse shouts and constant, cruel lashes of his long black whip.

Mitchell wondered if the breed was going to try his luck at some pot shots from the shelter of the point, but he did not hesitate. It was one of the chances of the Service. "Keep on until you get your man or he gets you," summarized in one sentence Mitchell's philosophy of his job.

The huskies, still going strong, tore around the point after the breed, and as Mitchell saw what was happening, he ripped out a sudden, explosive oath. In a deep, sheltered cove formed by the point he had just rounded and a sharp curve in the shore, was an old deserted trapper's camp nearly buried in snow, and Theoret was frantically digging through the snow down to the door. Even as Mitchell watched, the breed suddenly disappeared, and an instant later his dogs followed him, toboggan and all.

The policeman called his dogs to a halt, studying the lay of the land.

"Now isn't this a pretty how-d'ye-do?" he asked himself disgustedly, speaking half aloud, as men often do in the bush, where the eternal white silence has made even the sound of their own voices a godsend. "There he is, safe and sound, his grub with him, in a nice position to pot me if I get the least bit nosey, all sheltered and comfortable.

"They talk about 'the luck of the Mounties!' We have it, all right—but it's all *bad!*"

Having thus relieved his feelings a little, for grumbling and grousing are the immemorial privileges of the men of all services the world over, Mitchell devoted himself to the more practical business of getting himself into a strategic position commanding the camp.

After looking over the ground rather carefully, he decided in favor of the ridge that ran back from the point, and, making sure that he commanded the front of the cabin, he busied himself with preparations for the night; cutting up plenty of wood, stretching his tarp, and feeding the dogs.

He muttered and swore as he saw a cheerful stream of smoke issuing from a rusted, crooked tin stovepipe that projected a foot or so above the snow-covered roof of the camp, picturing to himself the gleeful contentment of the breed, and comparing that picture with his own predicament.

"I'd burn the place down over your head if I could!" he murmured vindictively. "Burn it down like a cabin where there's been smallpox. But covered with snow like that, I'd have a fine chance, wouldn't I?"

He ate a rather hearty meal of fried rice, fried moose steak, bannock and drank more than a pint of very hot, very sweet, and very strong tea, and as he ate, he studied the squat, snow-covered camp, with its perky plume of smoke.

Somehow, it was up to him to dislodge the breed. Of course, he could play a waiting game, and starve out the man in the cabin, or wait until he came down with blackleg, but it was not Mitchell's nature to play a waiting game. There was too much Irish in him for that.

Brute force wouldn't do it. If he marched up to the cabin as some of the damn' fools in the movies did, Joe would simply pot him neatly and safely from the shelter of his cabin, and go on his way rejoicing. So far, Joe Theoret was wanted for nothing worse than robbing the mails, but that was merely because so far it hadn't been necessary for the breed to kill anyone. That he would kill quickly enough on occasion, Mitchell had not the slightest doubt.

"I'd like to burn him out, that's what I'd like to do," he mused. "I could creep up at night and set fire to the place, just as we burned up those smallpox-infested wickiups up on Little Root. He'd come out humping then, what? But shucks! It'd be just like trying to burn snow!

"If I could only think . . ."

Perhaps twenty minutes later he began swearing softly, jubilantly, under his breath. "I believe it'll work! I believe it. I believe it!" he chuckled. "It'll work like a charm, or my name's Cohen!"

He busied himself in the rapidly gathering dusk, putting on his tea pannikin again, full of melted snow, delving in his pack, whistling soundlessly, happily, as he worked. From time to time he glanced towards the squatting cabin, grinning, being careful to keep screened by the fringe of young spruce behind which he had camped.

Night fell suddenly, and with it came the snow, a great dense smother of feathery whiteness that seemed to so fill the air that one could hardly breathe. The coals of Mitchell's fire hissed and sputtered and then died into blackness. The little mounds that appeared on the surface of the snow where the huskies had curled up and buried themselves, were leveled off so that in half an hour there was no evidence of the dogs at all, save for the small breathing holes.

Mitchell, through with his work now, lay snug and wide awake in his great rabbit-skin sleeping robe, drawing contentedly on his battered, stubby old pipe.

IT WAS still snowing the next morning, but only half-heartedly.

Mitchell was up and doing long before dawn, but a watery sun was above the tops of the distant trees, and the snow had almost entirely ceased before the first smoke from the rusted tin chimney told of Theoret's rising.

"Lazy devil!" muttered Mitchell. "All breeds are lazy. Well, I'll stir you up a little, I guess. No time like the present!"

From under the lashings of his toboggan he drew forth a crude bow, which he had fashioned the night before and strung with stout cord. He leaned the bow against a tree, close to a fire, and warmed it through and through before notching the string, for brittle with frost it would have snapped like a pipe stem.

He bent the bow, adjusted the string, and twanged it several times. It was a crude affair, but it would serve his purpose, he felt sure.

Next he procured an arrow, the point sharpened and hardened by charring. In lieu of feathers, there was a streamer of white cloth, upon which something had been written in soft lead pencil.

"Now if I haven't lost my skill, I ought to make one bolt do the trick," muttered Mitchell. "Anyway, here goes!"

He stepped from behind the screening cluster of young hemlocks and fitted the arrow to the string. The bow was thick and stiff, but Mitchell drew the arrow to the head, and sped it straight and true. Just as the string twanged there was the crack of a high-powered rifle, and a spurt of snow flew up a few feet away.

"Cut himself a loophole up above the snow line, the fox!" thought Mitchell, taking shelter behind the hemlocks. "Now to watch for results."

The arrow had struck the upper part of the door, all that could be seen above the snow, and fallen out of sight into the hollow dug by Theoret in gaining entrance. A perfect shot; Mitchell had not spent his boyhood among the Crees for nothing.

Even as he watched, the door opened a trifle, closed again almost immediately.

Mitchell chuckled and picked up his rifle.

IN THE gloom of the cabin Joe Theoret examined the arrow. The one window, high up under the eaves, emitted but a faint gray light, for snow had drifted against it during the night, and Theoret lighted one of his precious candles to aid him in his inspection.

He suspected a message; probably an order to surrender, and as he saw that there was indeed writing on the strip of white cloth that had served to feather the arrow, he chuckled. The policeman had much nerve to think such a command would be heeded! He held the cloth to the candle and read the one brief sentence written there:

Look above the door!

The grin left Theoret's face, and he glanced hastily towards the door. There was nothing. He picked up the candle, held it high, and searched the door carefully, but there was only the rough logs and the ragged fringe of moss chinking that would be found over the door of any camp.

"Sacre nom du nom!" muttered Theoret, who spoke three languages brokenly and swore fluently in two. "He tried to fool me, that one, eh? I look above the door; there is nothing. The policeman——"

Suddenly the idea struck him that the policeman meant above the door from the outside. Certainly; the policeman could know nothing of what was above the door from the inside. He, Theoret, had been a fool not to think of that before. He cursed himself in French and English for not thinking of so obvious a thing in the first place.

Very slowly and carefully he opened the door, pushing hard against the snow that was banked up against it for two-thirds its height. Then, being sure to keep the great bank of snow between himself and the watching Red Coat, he stuck his head out and looked up.

Theoret's face went suddenly white beneath the dirt and grease as he looked, for above the door, hanging from a weathered piece of branch stuck between two logs, was a strip of faded, frayed red cloth.

"The red plague!" croaked Theoret, staring up with dilated, fascinated eyes. "Eet ees the sign of the plague! One has had eet here; that ees why the place was deserted. And now I—I shall have eet too!"

Trembling, his face ashen, he crawled back into the cabin. He looked around with horror in his eyes, shrinking from touching anything in the room.

So that was why the policeman had said "Look above the door!" Cold sweat broke out on the breed, and his teeth chattered as with an ague. He was not a coward, this Theoret, but the fear of smallpox was part of his heritage from his Indian mother. Only the Indians of northern Canada know fully how to dread the red plague, for they have seen it in all its horror, helpless to stop its dreaded progress.

Only one thought possessed Theoret now, and that was to get away from this dwelling place of the red plague. A wild thought of digging out through the back wall, in the hope of escaping the policeman flashed through his mind, but he rejected it a moment later. He could never escape: his dogs were not equal to the terrible huskies of the Red Coat, and besides, what would he do out in the bush, alone, even if he should escape, when the red plague opened his pores and sores covered his body?

His fear of the dreaded smallpox swept away his fear of the policeman, and with a hoarse, despairing cry he flung open the door and clambered up over the smooth, trackless, wind-carved drift of snow, towards the waiting Red Coat. His hands were high above his head in token of surrender, and in his eyes was an insane terror. He was throwing himself into the arms of the law, but he was escaping the place over which fluttered the sinister pennon of the red plague.

JOE THEORET watched Mitchell adjust the dully gleaming handcuffs, something like satisfaction in his eyes. The dominant personality of the big Red Coat reassured him. The people of the

North have learned that they may rely upon the Mounty to protect them against any danger when they are in the right, and to trail them to the end of the longest trail when they do wrong. They are demi-gods to the simple minds of the natives and the half-natives, and slowly, in Mitchell's presence, Theoret was getting back his nerve.

"We weel go verr' queeck, *oui?*" he inquired eagerly. "We weel be where there is a *docteur* by the time the red plague comes to me, eh, *M'sieu?* You weel see to that, *oui?*"

Mitchell looked quizzically at his prisoner, a grin spreading on his genial features.

"I don't know whether it'll make you any happier or not, Joe," he replied, "but you're not any more likely to have smallpox than —well, than I am."

"*Sacre nom du nom!*" rattled Theoret, suddenly excited again. "You deed not see et, the red rag that ees the sign of the plague? You write 'Look above the door!' I look, and there eet ees—certainly the red plague eet eees een my blood, M'sieu?"

"Shucks, Joe, don't get so excited!" chuckled Mitchell. "That was just strategy. I put the rag there myself. Boiled it out in dirty water to make it look faded and weathered, and crept up in the storm while you slept. The wind and the snow covered my tracks. Thought it would smoke you out—and it did!"

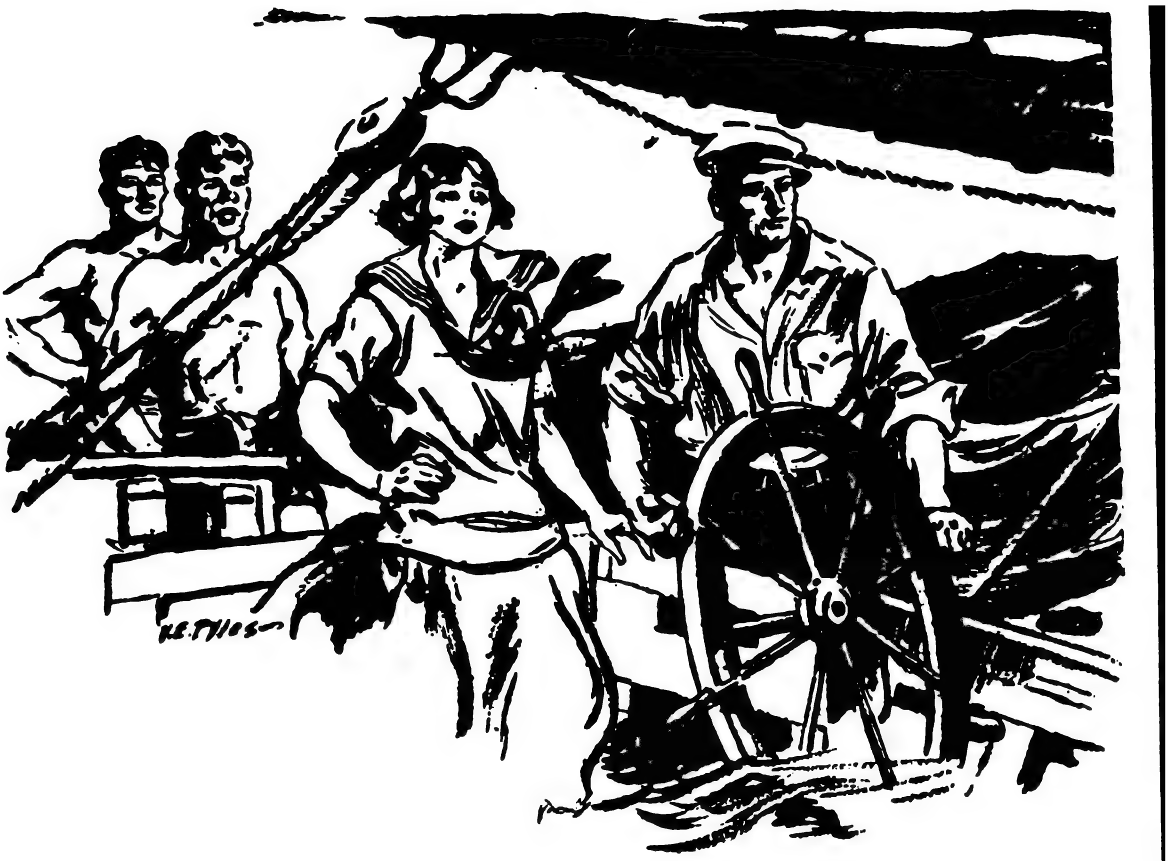
Theoret raised his manacled hands and shook them over his head in a sudden frenzy of impotent rage.

"Then there was no plague? You fool me, eh? *Sacre dieu!* Oh, I owe you something for thees, Red Coat!"

"Can the dramatics, Joe," advised Mitchel good-naturedly. "I've been threatened before, and it doesn't do any good. And as for owing somebody, it's you that owe me—look!"

He stripped off his heavy parka, and showed Theoret the back of his tunic, from which a long strip of cloth had been cut.

"Ruined a perfectly good tunic landing you, Joe," he chuckled. "Don't suppose I ever will be able to collect on that!"



Preceding Events Briefly Retold

They found him dying, adrift without water in the open sea, and as the spark of life fled from him, the name of Traquair lingered in horror on his pale, young lips. Traquair! A name of fear wherever the Island schooners touch and men lust for power and gold. Among those who saw the unknown youth die was Carver, and he trembled, but not with fear, at hearing that name.

Straight to Waihiti Carver sailed after that. Traquair was at Waihiti, so it had been said. Carver had a score to settle with Traquair, one that was bitter and of years' duration. Now after long search, he had located the man. Revenge would be no less sweet because of waiting.

McGinty, partner to Carver in their Island trading ventures, strove to dissuade him from this mad venture. But nothing could turn Carver aside until death had settled the balance between them. Once, years before, Traquair had thrust a treacherous knife in Carver's ribs, and had made off with the Dreaming God, a Chinese idol of gold, beautiful and beyond price. Not a thing a man might easily forget.

At Waihiti they find Traquair. The man is about to sail on his schooner, the *Amaranth*, with his partner Nicode. These two are a powerful pair, ruthless and strong, even though Nicode has not the will of Traquair. Carver and McGinty face them in the beach trading store. Little is said, but, in a second, the room is ablaze with flaming guns. The lamp is quenched, and Traquair and Nicode escape. They make for their vessel and are gone before Carver finds them again.

And behind them they leave Judith, daughter of Nicode, just blooming to womanhood, innocent, but wise in Island ways and endowed with the fighting spirit of her father. She defies Carver, when he tries to make her tell the destination of the *Amaranth*. She is not one from whom a secret is easily forced.

Carver forces the secret from a native. The *Amaranth* is bound for Parawa. Swiftly Carver and McGinty set sail in pursuit. And when they are well away, they find, stowaway in the hold of their *Nancy Q*, Judith, daughter of Nicode. She fights like a spitfire, but is helpless. It had been her intention to hide until the *Nancy Q* caught up with the *Amaranth*, and then to warn her father and Traquair, whom she half loves. Now that she has been discovered she knows not what to do.

All unsuspecting, the *Amaranth* reaches Parawa and glides into the secret lagoon through the hidden passage where none may follow without knowing the way. There Poldhu awaits them. Poldhu whose business is the luring of ships to the cruel coral reefs by night, that he may loot their wrecked hulls. In the lagoon lay Poldhu's cutter, a fast, trim craft which had been so aptly named the *Wolf*.

Between Traquair and Poldhu is smouldering distrust and hatred, and their meeting is of ominous portent. Poldhu the silent; Traquair the sure.

Part Two

The SECRET LAGOON

A Romance of the Southern Islands, of Love and Murder and Revenge on Coral Seas

By BASIL CAREY

CHAPTER VI

THE DOUBLE CROSS

WHEN Judith opened her eyes and saw Carver's back she shut them hurriedly. With immense caution she opened them again. A slight sound escaped her lips. Instantly he was at her side, kneeling on the deck. She raised herself on one elbow and begged for water in a feeble voice. Kukeke brought some in an enamel cup.

"Feel all right?" Carver asked anxiously.

She nodded. His eyes grew stern.

"What's the game?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean all right. How did you get here and what are you going to do now?"

Judith thought quickly. During her supposed swoon she had learned enough from their talk to know that bluff would not answer. These two men had hit the nail on the head when they said she loved Traquair and meant to warn him. It would be waste of time trying to make them believe anything else. Let it be war then, and be damned to them!

"You know," she said, with narrowed eyes.

"You mean you're going to defy me on board my own ship? If you think you'll stand between me and Traquair you're making the worst mistake you ever made. Do you love him?"

He shot out the question abruptly. McGinty, hearing voices, came up to find the two of them glaring at each other in a way that set him chuckling inwardly.

"What's up?" he asked. "All right again, are you? And what do you reckon you'll do now, young lady?"

Judith tossed her head defiantly. A scud of flying spray whipped the blood into her face. The sun was going down, and already the faint stars pricked the sky. From the forecastle came the low sound of singing.

"Do you love him?"

"And if I do—?"

"You've got damned poor taste then," Carver told her hotly. "He's rotten all through."

"What's he done to you?"

"What's he done to me?" Carver shouted. "I'll tell you. You won't believe it. Women never believe the truth about their lovers. Have you heard of the Dreaming God of Fu-Chow? You have? It had a temple of its own. The Chinese worshiped it. It's not big, but it's perfect. It's—it's absolute beauty. And the eyes are shut. The Chinese have a saying that the man who can make them open will die. If you know anything about China you'll know it's in the throes of rebellion against anybody who tries to bring a bit of sane common sense to the governing of it. The old gods of China have had their day. The rebels don't care what they destroy. Consequence of growing civilized, I reckon. Anyway, four years ago off Hongkong we sighted a derelict dhow. That was when I was sailing in the *Pauline*. We boarded her and found nobody. She'd been looted. But in a corner we found an iron box in a bundle of rags, and inside was the Dreaming God. Most likely it was pirates who wrecked the dhow. That doesn't matter much. What does matter is this: I changed ships at Hongkong."

The sun was dipping into the sea. Above them the sky deepened to indigo. Judith shivered in the cold wind that comes with dusk in these latitudes.

"I was sailing under a man called Henry Douglas. He was half a Chink. Queer about the cheeks, and funny slanting eyes. Traquair was in port—come up from the Carolines with a cargo of bêche-de-mer. Douglas was a friend of his. Yes, he told him about the dhow."

He paused, moistening his lips.

"It was I who had found the Dreaming God. It belonged to me. It was mine. Mine, do you hear? On the night I changed ships Traquair lay wait for me. He knew what I was carrying. He came out of the dark with a knife in his hand."

With a swift movement he raised his hand and jerked his shirt open. The dying sun shone redly on the ugly scar that showed on his chest.

"That's what Traquair gave me in return for the thing he stole," went on the passionate voice. "Do you wonder why I hate him? Do you wonder why I'm going to settle with him? He meant to kill me. One man dead in Hongkong doesn't make much stir. I've hunted the Islands for him. I'd almost given up hope of finding him. Then we heard just by chance that he was in Waihiti."

"How?"

"We picked up a lad in an open boat," he told her grimly. "He'd been hurt so badly that he died. He told us where to find Traquair."

Judith tossed her proud head. Her cheeks had paled, but she faced him boldly.

"You're a rotten liar," she said. "Why don't you practice more?"

WITH that she walked away, her head still high. She went to the stern and stood there, watching the foam that gleamed in the wake of the *Nancy Q.* And though her heart hammered the furious words "Liar! liar!" her head told her that after all it might be true. She remembered the look that had come over Traquair's face in the hut when he spoke of Carver. The violent hostility between the men must have had some strong foundation. But even if it were true, what did it matter? If Traquair were the stronger, let him do what he would. The battle is to the strong. Among the Islands life is crude and men's outlook becomes primitive. "Look out for yourself first," was Nicode's creed, and the creed of his fellows. It was the law of Nature, who makes no allowance for the weaklings, but drives them down, crushing them out of existence, trampling them into the ground in her slow, relentless march through the ages.

Thus Judith argued with herself, fighting against the truth. For she knew, by the feeling of sick dismay in her heart, that Carver was telling her the truth. Well, then, suppose it was as he said. Suppose that cruel scar was indeed the result of Traquair's knife? The thoughts seethed in her mind as the foam seethed in the track of the ship. Against the possibilities of Traquair's savagery she put the memory of his eyes and of his hands. Surely when a woman loved a man, it didn't matter what he'd done, did it?

Did it? . . .

She turned impatiently and found McGinty regarding her with a speculative eye. Across the deck their shadows fell, fantastic, enormous.

"You go easy with Carver," McGinty was saying in a warning voice. "He ain't too good to deal with when his temper's up. And don't kid yerself into thinkin' anything you can say or do will keep him off Traquair. There's no Sunday school on Parawa, and Carver ain't been taught to turn the other cheek. You're a woman. You can't understand gettin' even with a man who's downed you. 'Tain't natural that you should. But you've done a damn fool thing comin' aboard. Do you think Traquair'll be glad to see you?"

Judith's eyes flashed.

"Go to hell!" she said hotly, and brushed past him. Carver hailed her as she went by the companion-head.

"If you want food, come and get it," he told her curtly. Then his head and shoulders vanished with scant ceremony, and she was left to please herself. Slowly she followed him down the companion into the cabin. The main-mast went through here from ceiling to floor and a table had been built round it. A swinging lamp burnt smokily. Its yellow light fell on the dishes which Kukeke brought in from the galley. A pair of sea boots stood in one corner. There were two lockers in the room, one of which had a broken lock. From this a coil of rope spilled on the floor. On the wall opposite the door, McGinty had nailed a colored supplement bearing the legend, "Ulysses and the Sirens. Presented free with Our Christmas Number." It showed nine sirens, extremely well developed, serenading a cherub-like Ulysses who stood at the prow of an impossible ship. In his hand was the artist's remarkable conception of what a lyre looked like in Homer's time. The ship was depicted with her sails full-bellied by some extraordinary wind which left the sea glassy as a mill pond.

"It's a nice bit of color," McGinty used to say apologetically, "an' I like the gals. That second one to starboard now——"

Carver was seated in the one chair which the room contained. He did not look up as Judith stood irresolutely in the doorway. She glanced over her shoulder for McGinty, but he did not come. In silence she dragged a box from one corner to the table and sat down. Carver never raised his eyes. On the table were baked yams, fish caught off Waihiti, sweet potatoes, a freshly cut pineapple, and the inevitable corned beef. Judith shrugged her shoulders. Obviously Carver was determined to be thoroughly rude and unpleasant. Let it be so, then. With a resolute air she helped herself to a cold-looking slab of corned beef and began to eat it in silence.

It was a strange meal. They might have been two strangers, seated by chance at the same table in a restaurant. To Kukeke, hovering in the doorway with a pot of coffee, the whole thing was perplexing in the extreme. Plainly the two white people were not at ease, and he was torn with a desire to break the strained air which hung over the cabin. On deck, McGinty's voice sounded. Bare, running feet answered his call. Kukeke shifted from one foot to the other. When would one of these silent figures speak?

"More coffee," said Carver suddenly, and Judith jumped at the sound. Though he did not look at her, he knew she was startled. His glance stole to her hands, and so up and up to her throat, and rested there.

"Taofe belong Kahiva," murmured Kukeke at his elbow. "Yudita (Judith), suppose not drink taofe; go cold, all same bad."

Solicitously he poured out more coffee for Judith. He admired her. He had lived long on Waihiti and she knew him. Why, then, did she not speak to him? And why was she on this boat with the master of the devil in the lion's head?

The meal dragged on. To Judith it seemed endless. Was it really only that morning that she had climbed aboard? She wished McGinty would come down. At any rate he was human. He would not sit staring at the floor as Carver did. She pouted rebelliously. Was she a piece of wood, to be ignored thus? The tension was threatening to snap her nerves when McGinty came lumbering down the companion.

"Strike me, but I'm starvin'," he announced. "Maowa's keepin' her dead south."

He looked from one to the other as he sat down.

"Don't mind me," he said at last. "Just act as if I wasn't here. Who's turn is it to ask the next riddle?"

Carver scowled at him.

"Shut up," he said gruffly, and rose to go on deck.

McGinty put out a detaining hand.

"How are we goin' to fix it about sleepin'?" he demanded. "She's got to sleep somewhere. Now, where?"

No one answered. From above came

the sound of wind in the rigging, as the *Nancy Q* ploughed on through the tropic night. Carver looked at Judith. She sat very still, the color ebbing away under his glance. Somehow he understood that she was afraid . . . The knowledge roused a sudden swift pity, such as he might have felt towards an animal that trembled captive between his hands. He crossed to the door of his sleeping berth and flung it open. From a locker he pulled out a brown blanket, crumpled but unused, and threw it on the bunk. Then he went back and stood beside Judith. McGinty laid down his knife and fork, open-eyed.

"You can sleep there," said Carver curtly to Judith. "You needn't look scared. I'm not Traquair. Take this."

Something crashed on the table.

It was a key.

II

IT WAS characteristic of Poldhu that he did not speak first. He waited for the other man to begin. The Kanakas called him "The Silent One." Themselves masters of volubility, they dreaded the immobility of his lips, and the sinister patience which made him listen until there was nothing left to say. Seeing him for the first time, Nicode understood why Traquair had hurried south. He had met men with that sleepy look before. Quickly he summed up Poldhu as dangerous. He mistrusted the listless air, the lazy, veiled glance that greeted their entrance. He noted the strength which lay in the sinewy hands that shuffled a worn pack of cards. A warning gong sounded in his brain at sight of the powerful jaw, the cruel mouth, the dark, half-shut eyes. Here was a man, decided Nicode, who would stop at nothing to gain his ends. The problem remained: what were his ends?

Traquair went up to the table and poured himself out a drink. Nicode did the same. Poldhu sat watching them, his great fingers caressing the cards.

"I saw the *Princess Helen*, or what's left of her," said Traquair at last. "Things work out all right?"

"Yes."

"Am I too late? Have you been out?"

"Yes."

"When did she strike? Last night?"

"Yes."

"You've been quick," said Traquair, in a surly tone. "You knew I was coming. Why couldn't you wait? It would only have been a short time."

"The sea wouldn't wait," said Poldhu. "If we hadn't put out when we did, there'd have been nothing at all."

"Nothing at all? Then you didn't get——"

"No."

Traquair's fingers drummed moodily on the table.

"Then it's been wasted time. You swore she was carrying bullion."

"She was."

"Then where the hell is it?"

"Sunk before we got to her, most likely. There was nothing but trade junk aboard. Besides, she was pretty badly bashed up. Sides stove right in."

He rose and opened a door behind him.

"Here's all we got."

They went out into a yard that had a wooden fence round it to keep off thieving Kanakas. Here, spread out to dry, was a collection of salvage goods taken from the *Princess Helen*. Cheap trade goods, a couple of guns, some tinned stores, a wad of damp dollar bills, a pile of tanned skins, a soggy-looking dress suit, together with other odd articles, all lay drying in the sun.

Traquair was furious. He made no attempt to hide his chagrin. Poldhu heard him out, and then spoke.

"Tomorrow we can take the divers out again. They didn't go far today. The devil was in the reefs, I think. We scraped the keel twice."

"It's God's truth that you found no bullion?"

"God's truth," agreed Poldhu.

From first to last neither of them had taken the least notice of Nicode. Now Traquair jerked a casual thumb towards him.

"Nicode," he said laconically to Poldhu.

Poldhu nodded.

"Why were you late?" he said to Traquair. "You should have been here two days ago."

"Bad wind," answered Traquair sullenly. "Anyway, it doesn't matter, does it? You and Morton are competent to wreck a ship on your own, I suppose? You seem to think all this disappointment has happened because I was late."

"If you hadn't been late," said Poldhu, "a thing which has happened might have been avoided."

"What do you mean?"

For answer Poldhu led the way through the hut to the outer door. It stood wide open and they gazed straight across the harbor through a break in the trees.

"The *Wolf's* there all right," said Poldhu.

"Why shouldn't she be?" burst out Traquair impatiently. "What are you driving at?"

"Did you see any other boat when you came in?"

"No."

"Did you expect to?"

"I thought the *Seamew* might be in. I suppose Morton is working the usual game. Nothing's happened to him, has it?"

Poldhu's face darkened.

"Morton's working his own game. Two days ago I went to the east side to plant the decoy light for the *Princess Helen*. Morton stayed behind. I thought nothing of it—why should I? You and I and Morton, we've worked together for God knows how long. I went at midday. I came back at sunset. He was gone."

"Gone? Gone where?"

"Straight to hell, I hope," said Poldhu bitterly. "If he hasn't I'll send him there when I get him. He's double-crossed us. Yes, he has. Morton, that you and I used to laugh at! Morton, who we said was born with hands and no head! He's got the laugh of us. He's gone."

SO MORTON was gone, was he? Well, bad luck go with him. What a mistake he and Poldhu had made, thought Traquair. To think, that Morton, the fool, the slow thinker, the man whose only values were his stupidity and his unquestioning obedience, that he should desert the sinister partnership of Parawa. Yet what did his desertion signify, after all? Merely one pair of hands the less. Ah, but it meant more than that. It meant that he would spread the secret of Parawa, that his foolish tongue, loosened now, would bring havoc to the men whom he had left behind. His boat, the *Seamew*, was a lugger, slow but solid, like himself. Poldhu, Traquair and Morton . . . And now it was Poldhu and Traquair.

"He didn't go alone," said Poldhu, watching him.

"Who went with him, then? Some fool of a girl?"

"No. Can you guess why he went at all?"

"You quarreled over something?"

"Yes. Do you know what it was? Do you know what he wanted? Can you guess what it could be?"

Under his tan Traquair whitened.

"Not—not that? Not the Dreaming God?"

Poldhu nodded.

"Hell!" said Traquair. "Do you mean he stole it? The swine! He's always wanted it. He was always looking at it with his cat's eyes. I saw him touch it once and I told him I'd kill him if he did it again. It wasn't his. It was mine."

"It belonged to all of us," Poldhu reminded him. "What we get, we share. That's the law on Parawa. When you went away last month, he began. He used to touch it, to slide his hands over it. Then he'd sit there just looking at it. He got kind of quiet. My head was full of the *Princess Helen*, else I'd have paid more attention to him, I suppose."

"Where do you think he's gone?" asked Nicode.

"The Kanakas say he headed northeast. Most likely to Lefroy on Flanders Island. They used to be friendly before Morton joined in with us. You see, his idea was always to take the thing to someone who'd buy it. He's got the mind of a dog. He might try to make Tahiti and so to America. The thing would fetch a good many dollars. But the *Seamew's* a heavy boat and slow. He'd take half the time in Lefroy's *Concepcion*. Ah, there's a ship for you! Like the wind, she is."

"You think he's gone to Flanders Island?"

"I'd bet my shirt he has."

They went back into the house. Traquair flung himself into a chair and turned his face to the wall. Poldhu shouted for food to be brought. Presently the table was set, with a great dish of pork from the gaunt island pigs as the chief attraction. Poldhu brought out a fresh bottle of Scotch. But Traquair neither moved nor spoke. Poldhu shrugged his shoulders, and he and Nicode fell to with a will. It was late and the short dusk was upon them. A

Kanaka boy brought a lamp with a wide shade to keep off the hordes of moths that came out of the dimness towards the light. The pork was tough, but there was a sauce with it, made of cocoanut milk and the juice of lime fruit, that rendered it palatable. Nicode was hungry. He ate heartily. And Poldhu was a good host. He plied his guest with whisky until Nicode became garrulous. Presently Traquair left them and went out into the night. But Poldhu stayed. He listened to Nicode, who was rapidly becoming confidential.

"Traquair's a fool," he was saying, "yes, he is. That's what he is, a fool. Do you know why he's late? Why, a shark was in the lagoon at Waihiti, and he wasted a day, killing the damn brute. Wanted to show off—Judith, y'know. Damn fine girl, Judith. Only too much like her mother. That chap—I killed him. Can't go back now. Can't ever go back. Don't want to. She was dead before I killed him. Swine!"

Poldhu filled his glass again.

"Carver—" went on the hiccuping voice, "yesh, I reckon Traquair was more scared than he let on. What had Carver to do with the Dreaming God? It was him Traquair stole it from. Thish is damn good whisky. Carver don't know where we've gone. He can't follow us. An' if he did, it wouldn't be any use. The bloomin' idol's been stole, and that's that. But, y' unnerstand," he leaned forward, "I'm goin' to get my share, sometime. Traquair he promised me he'd sell it and I'd get a fourth share. Yesh, thash right. Well, he must get it back. I say, he got to get it back. It's a damn shame, but he's got to get——"

Poldhu left him with the bottle and went out to look for Traquair. The scent of crinum lilies came sweet and heady on the night air. Above the palms the stars shone in a velvet sky. Dimly came the sound of breakers from the outer sea. A dog slunk by, intent on some marauding expedition. A glowing cigar end showed Traquair's whereabouts.

"Do you think there's any chance of Carver starting on the chase?"

"How did you— I suppose Nicode's blurted it out. No. Carver doesn't know where we've gone."

"Does anybody?"

"Judith."

"Judith?"

"Nicode's daughter. She won't tell Carver."

"No?"

"She's lovely," said Traquair, "and I—she—what the hell does it matter whether Nicode likes it or not? Anyway, she won't tell Carver."

Poldhu nodded. "We needn't reckon with him, then. What are you going to do?"

Traquair kicked at the earth with his restless heels.

"I'm going after Morton. The *Amaranth* ought to get to Flanders Island before he can fix up anything with Lefroy."

"Oh, let him go," urged the other impatiently. "There's other work to get through besides chasing half over the Pacific. How long before we're going to do the *Les Aves* job? If we're going to do that at all, it ought to be done soon. It can't wait. If we're not quick, old Patterson will——"

He talked on. In ten minutes Traquair was in a white heat of determination to follow Morton and wrest from him the thing which he had stolen. Poldhu's careful eloquence had gained its end.

So at dawn they carried Nicode like a log down to the landing stage and dumped him still sleeping on board the *Amaranth*. The water casks had been filled again, and some fresh-killed meat put in brine in the hold. Flanders Island lay four hundred and thirty-two miles to the northeast. Traquair went on board. Slowly the *Amaranth* moved under the morning breeze, all sails set to catch the slight wind.

Poldhu stood on shore and watched her disappear through the narrow passage that led to open sea. It would be well, he reflected, if she never came back. No doubt Lefroy would be surprised to see Traquair. A nasty customer, Lefroy. It was Monday. By Thursday the *Seamew* should return from Wakatea, where Morton had gone to buy some iron casing. On Thursday night, they would divide the bullion which the *Princess Helen* had carried. It is easier to divide things into two than into three. Poldhu went back to the hut and opened a cupboard. At the back of the cupboard was a sliding panel. He pushed it aside and entered a small room. Here reposed the true spoil of the dead ship, a small iron box, very heavy.

But Poldhu did not look at it. He went

to a corner and lifted a cloth off something which stood there, something for which stupid, honest Morton cared nothing at all, something which Poldhu prized more than anything in the world—the Dreaming God of Fuchow.

CHAPTER VII

FEAR

McGINTY was cautious. He remembered strange tales of Parawa. He had heard of the treacherous reefs that had sent many a good ship to her death. Therefore when the island loomed up straight ahead in the dim light that comes after sunset, he gave orders to heave to. He was not such a fool as to stand in to any place in the dark, much less an island with the reputation of Parawa. He had the sea anchors cast, great canvas bags that fill with water and float submerged, offering sufficient resistance to the tug of the waves to keep a ship steady. After nightfall he and Carver kept a steady eye on the island, watching for any spark of light. None appeared.

Carver was puzzled. He made the boys take it in turn to keep watch aloft. He and McGinty relieved each other on deck every two hours. Judith, lying sleepless in the brown blanket, heard their heavy footsteps on the companion.

"It's queer there was no light," said McGinty, waking Carver at two o'clock. "Maybe the village is round the other side of the island."

"It can't be," objected Carver, reaching drowsily for his coat. "This is the leeward side."

McGinty shook his head as he turned in. He was asleep in four minutes. Carver, pacing the deck, blew his fingers to keep them warm. They were standing by without lights of any kind. McGinty judged it dangerous to give the least hint of their presence. In vain Carver strained his eyes in the darkness. The impenetrable night hid everything save the knots of foam that flung themselves against the ship's sides. At four o'clock he went down and woke McGinty.

"Reckon there's no need for you to go up," he said. "Moawa's up there. There's nothing to be seen."

McGinty grunted.

"Aw, I'll go up," he said at last. "It'll be dawn soon. There's queer things happen at dawn very often. An' Moawa's a fool, anyway."

He stumped on deck, and Carver rolled himself in his blankets to snatch the last couple of hours' sleep.

He was awakened by a shout from McGinty. Half awake he rolled out of the bunk and tore up the companion to find McGinty with the glass glued to his eye. A ship was slipping out of Parawa, out of the rock itself, so it seemed. Her sails were spread and the watchers grew breathless as they noted the zigzag course which she took.

"Where the hell did she come from?" McGinty wondered. "There's no lights an' no houses an' no harbor."

"No harbor that we can see," Carver corrected him. "See how she's threading about? Whoever's steering her knows every reef and every cross-current that's there. Do you reckon it's Traquair?"

"I should say so," agreed McGinty. "She's too far off to see her name, and I don't know the cut of her jib well enough to say off-hand that it's the *Amaranth*. But I bet Kukeke would know."

Kukeke did know. He went aloft to get a better view and asserted firmly that it was the *Amaranth*.

"Well, what the devil is he going to do now?" demanded McGinty. "He can't have made Parawa before yesterday. Well, where's he off to now?"

"I don't know," said Carver grimly. "But we're going after him if it's to the world's end."

"Think he's recognized us?"

"No. But he will soon. It doesn't matter a curse how soon either. Keep out of gun-shot, that's all."

In the growing light they watched to see which direction Traquair would take. As soon as she was clear of the reefs the *Amaranth* turned her head to the north-east and began to run before the wind. McGinty hauled in the sea anchors and clapped on enough sail to keep the *Amaranth* in sight. It was not likely that Traquair would suspect his pursuers for the first day. Ships sometimes hove to if they found themselves near the reefs at night. The mere fact of the *Nancy Q's* presence would not be sufficient to arouse his suspicions. But where was he going?

Carver went below and spread out a torn chart. After a time he traced a track across it with his forefinger.

"See here," he said to McGinty, "if he's keeping the course he started on, I should say he's making for one of the Houtens. See where the Houten group lies? Due northeast. Lot of guano trade there. And it's nigh on five hundred miles."

"Ain't there nothing between here and the Houtens?"

Carver pointed to a speck marked "Flanders Island."

"There's this," he said dubiously.

"He wouldn't want to go there, would he?"

"Why should he go northeast at all?"

"Blamed if I know," growled the other.

There was the sound of a key and Judith appeared. McGinty greeted her, but Carver said nothing.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"We're off Parawa," McGinty told her.

Her face paled. Without another word she walked by them and went on deck. Carver, following, heard her exclaim, "But we're going away from it!"

"We are," he told her. "And why? Because Traquair's in front of us, heading northeast for God knows where."

"He's left Parawa?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"Ask me something I'm likely to know," he said disgustedly. "His reasons don't matter to me. But where he goes we're going. If you'd told me what I wanted to know the other night at Hogan's, we'd have nabbed him before he left Parawa."

THE sun was getting high. The deck began to feel hot beneath Judith's bare feet. A feeling of helplessness swept over her. She was alone among enemies. Well, whose fault was it? If she had stayed on Waihiti with Hogan, she would at least be safe. Who could tell what Carver would do? His black eyes gleamed with anger as he looked at her. The thought of seeing Traquair had inspired her with fearlessness. For a moment she knew terror. But her indomitable courage surged up again, beating back the dread that had seized her.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

"Do about it?" echoed Carver. "If you were a boy I'd thrash you till you couldn't stand."

"And as I'm not a boy, you just amuse yourself by making threats," she flashed out.

"You're one of Traquair's belongings," he reminded her. "Do you expect me to sing with joy because you're here? I didn't want you. I didn't ask you to come. I wish to heaven I could get rid of you."

Judith stamped her foot.

"I'm no one's belongings," she said furiously. "If I were a man I'd stretch you out."

He laughed contemptuously and went to the tiller. Left alone, she leaned against the swaying mast and felt the cool wind smooth the angry color from her cheeks. Far ahead she could make out a ship's masts. That must be the *Amaranth*. Her heart leaped at the thought. If they should overtake her there would be a fight. Could there be any question as to who would win? What chance would Carver have against her father and Traquair? No man had yet beaten Traquair. He was invincible. His great strength, his sure aim, had stood by him. As sure as Traquair . . .

"Come to breakfast," said McGinty's voice across her thoughts.

"I don't want any," said Judith.

"Do as you're told," Carver thundered at her. "Haven't you made enough trouble already? Have we got to put up with your whims and fancies as well? If you don't eat, you'll get ill. Do you think I want a sick woman on board? Go down with McGinty and eat your food."

"I won't," Judith flared at him.

"Then I'll make you," said he. "Kukeke, you come here take this fella tiller."

Kukeke ran to do his bidding. Carver rose and came forward. Panic swept over Judith at the sight of him, huge, masterful. Like a scared rabbit she shot down the companion, nearly knocking down Moawa, waiting patiently with the coffee.

"Yuditi come down all same damn quick," said Moawa reproachfully. "Suppose taofe he fall, Maginitee he say Moawa all same damn fool."

"Hold your noise," said McGinty placidly. "Judith, this is salt pork. If you don't like it, Moawa can open a can of salmon."

Judith glanced nervously over her shoulder.

"I'll have pork," she said indifferently. McGinty looked at her with an experienced eye.

"Carver been bullyin' you?"

"No."

"Females like bein' bullied, really," he told her. "It's their nature. I've never yet met the woman who wouldn't lie down and let a masterful man walk over her."

"No one's going to walk over me," she muttered. "When did this pig die?"

"He is a bit tough, ain't he?" McGinty agreed. "But there—them island pigs have to put up with a lot afore their throats are cut. Over in Mowawi they let 'em run wild and then hunt 'em, just for the sport."

But Judith did not want to talk. Her emotions were in a whirl. Chief among them surged a hatred of the man on deck who bullied her as if she were a Kanaka. She flushed at the memory of the way in which she had sprung to do his bidding. Presently her knife and fork ceased to move. McGinty, looking up, was perturbed to see two large tears coursing down her cheeks. But she shook her head when he demanded the reason. Choking back her sobs, she applied herself stoically to the tough pork. McGinty set himself to comfort her.

"Go easy, now. It'll come out all right. You shouldn't ever have come here. But that's past, now. Well, keep out of Carver's way. He don't understand women and he don't like 'em."

But she would not answer him. She finished her meal and sat staring straight in front of her till McGinty began to feel uneasy. He went on deck. Carver was at the tiller with a sullen face.

"Do you know what? The *Amaranth's* a quicker boat than this. If we're not careful we'll lose her."

"How long before Traquair tumbles to it that we're after him?"

"Not long. When he knows, he'll try every dodge there is to choke us off."

"At the rate he's goin', he won't have any trouble in doin' that," said McGinty bitterly. "'Tis a very chancy business altogether, us pickin' up that boy and findin' out quite casual where Traquair was; and then comin' to Waihiti like we did. We only caught up to him because he'd stayed to kill a bloomin' shark. We only lost him because that fool of a girl wouldn't tell us where he'd gone. If we'd been half a day sooner we'd have got him on Parawa. Just cursed bad luck."

"Women are the devil," said Carver vindictively.

"She's a game little devil, though. Believe me, she sat at that table howlin' like mad, and yet she——"

"Crying? What for?"

"Overcome by your pleasant manners, I suppose," returned McGinty. "It's easy to see you've never met any women. Chasin' her about, and shoutin' at her!"

Carver felt uncomfortably brutal. He said nothing and McGinty moved away with a sniff of contempt at the other's failure to treat women as they should be treated. When Judith came on deck her eyes were red, but her mouth was firm. Not by word or look did she take the slightest notice of Carver. She swept by him with such an air of disdain that he reddened in spite of himself.

For the rest of the day she avoided him. He did not speak to her. Indeed, neither he nor McGinty had time for anything except the task of keeping the *Amaranth* in sight. Twice they lost her and it was only by clapping on every stitch of canvas that they glimpsed her masts after what seemed æons of time. By the evening they had decided that she must know she was being pursued. This made it imperative to keep her in view. Doubtless Traquair would try to give them the slip as soon as night fell. Both of them dreaded the next morning. Suppose the sun rose on an empty sea? There would be nothing for it but to keep a dogged course to the northeast and hope against hope that they might sight their quarry. Had the *Nancy Q* been a faster boat they might have overtaken the *Amaranth*. As it was, the *Nancy Q* strained every spar to keep her enemy in view.

Night fell and found Carver peering blindly to the northeast. The wind had shifted a couple of points and they were obliged to tack. The *Nancy Q* was a heavy boat to handle, and Carver cursed at the loss of time. Spray was whipping over the deck. It stung his face and his eyes. On, on into the darkness went the ship, hurrying through the night. The *Amaranth* showed no lights. After sunset she had disappeared as completely as a ghost ship. The sky was clouded, and McGinty declared he smelt disaster in the wind.

But it was not in the wind that disaster waited for them, nor in the hidden sky, nor in the restless, heaving sea.

II

TRAQUAIR and Nicode were in the throes of a quarrel. They sat in the cabin while the *Amaranth* rocked her way through the opposing waves. The remains of a meal lay on the table. The companion door was open and they could hear the wind thrumming in the sails. Anger took the two men in different ways. Nicode's swarthy face was red and blotched. His hands worked nervously at a button on his shirt. His small eyes opened and closed very quickly when he was speaking. Traquair was still. He had gone white, and his eyes were fixed on the other in an insolent stare.

"I tell you it's a fool's chase," Nicode was saying. "That Poldhu, I don't trust him. If I hadn't been fool enough to get drunk, we'd never have started. You think you're so damn clever, don't you? Who is this Lefroy, anyway, that Morton should go rushin' away to Flanders Island? Tell you what, I think it's a trick."

"Poldhu's never lied to me," Traquair retorted.

It was true. Foreseeing that it would one day stand him in good stead, Poldhu had been consistently truthful with Traquair.

"That's not to say he's never goin' to begin," objected Nicode. "He gave me a queer feeling. I don't like that kind with half-shut eyes. Who can tell what game he's up to this minute?"

"You shut your mouth," returned the other, angrily. "I say we're going on. If Morton's anywhere he'll be at Flanders Island. He's friendly with Lefroy. They used to run together years ago till Lefroy left the sea. Anyway, why should Poldhu double-cross me?"

"He might want to get something," said Nicode shrewdly. "You left the Dreaming God on Parawa. How do you know it's not there now? Eh? How do you know?"

He rose and began to walk up and down the narrow room.

"I don't like it, Traquair. What'll you do if you get to Flanders Island and find Lefroy knows nothing about it? You'll look a damn fool. And you'll be one. That ship that's followed us all day—it might be a trader makin' for the Houtens. Or it mightn't. See? It mightn't. She's kept just far enough away so we can't see much beyond her masts. But she's there all the time."

"You think it's Carver. Yes, you do. So do I. Well?"

Nicode made no answer.

"Are you trying to start a quarrel?" enquired Traquair suavely.

"I'd like to know how I stand," countered the other. "I joined you on this trip because—because——"

"Because you didn't trust me. Go on."

"All right," retorted Nicode recklessly. "I didn't trust you. And I don't trust you now. Put that in your pipe and smoke it. Months ago you promised me my share in the profits of that idol. All right. I don't get it. You put me off and put me off and at last I come with you to Parawa—and what do we find? The blasted thing's been stolen. Who is Morton, anyway? You've never said much about him. Poldhu tells you he's stolen the damn thing and you lap it up like milk. Why the hell should Morton come to Flanders Island? Oh, don't tell me again that he used to run with Lefroy and Lefroy's got a fast boat. That be blowed for a tale. I believe you've got something up your sleeve. It's a put-up job. How do I know you and Poldhu aren't——"

"Go on."

"How do I know you're straight?"

"Cut it out," said Traquair roughly. But Nicode would not be silent.

"It's a fool's errand, Traquair. Take my tip and let's go back to Parawa. Poldhu's a liar. I saw it in his eyes. Go on, say he's never lied to you. Maybe he's told the truth nineteen times so that you'll believe him the twentieth."

He paused and threw out his hands in a curious, helpless gesture.

"I don't know how I can tell, but I can. Poldhu's not straight with you."

Traquair struck him across the mouth. He coughed and staggered back, his hand pressed to his lips. When he drew it away it was red. He crouched to spring and found himself staring at Traquair's gun.

"Try it on, Nicode."

The color ebbed from Nicode's face. He began to talk in a queer, choked voice.

"You hulking bully," he said, "you're top-dog now. But wait. I'll get even with you. And Judith—you shan't touch her. Do you hear? You shan't have her. She's under age and you can't marry her, if I say no."

"Who wants to marry her?"

Nicode drew back.

"So you planned it—that way, did you?"

Tali shouted from the deck, and Traquair went quickly. Left alone, Nicode stood still, nursing his bleeding mouth. Furious thoughts whirled across his mind, and chief among them rose a hatred which gradually superseded every other emotion. So he, Nicode, was to be struck and threatened as if he were a mutinous hand. He was a catspaw, then, a thing of no account. Traquair thought of him as less than nothing. Ah, but Traquair should learn his mistake. He should find out, by bitter experience, that he had to reckon with a man as powerful as himself.

Traquair came down again.

"That ship's dogging us. It's Carver all right. We'll make easting tonight. That ought to get us well away. Once let him lose track of us and he's done. How he knew where we were going in the first place beats me. Do you think Judith——"

At the word Nicode wheeled round to face him.

"Don't soil her name with your dirty lips."

He went to his bunk and fetched out a piece of rag to staunch his mouth. Traquair watched him oddly. Was it possible that Nicode was becoming dangerous?

THEN began between them a furtive observation of each other's movements. They spoke little. The night came on, and they made easting as Traquair had said. He hoped by a big detour to put Carver entirely off the scent. The wind was rising and the *Amaranth* swerved and curvetted like a nervous horse. Until midnight it took the entire energy of everyone on board to hold her to her course. The angry waves tore at her sides and snapped their fangs at her masts. She was carrying too much canvas for such a wind. Traquair was reluctant to take in sail. But at last he was forced to do so by the increasing strength of the wind.

Just after midnight the wind abated a little and veered to the west. This eased the *Amaranth* from the constant need of tacking. Traquair set a straight course, determined to run due east until morning and so throw off his pursuer. It was one o'clock when he went below to snatch an hour's sleep. He tossed off his boots and his wet coat and threw himself down on his bunk. But he did not sleep at once. He was thinking of two incidents that had happened that night. The first had occurred when the *Amaranth* heeled suddenly to port and threw him off his balance. He had slid down the deck with such violence that he slipped half over the side before he could clutch at a stanchion and drag himself back. Nicode had seen him go. But he had made no movement to help.

The second thing that stuck in Traquair's mind was the memory of something that whistled by his ear as he toiled with Tali and Puaha at the mainsail. What was it?

He knew. For a long time he had known of the subtle hostility that Nicode felt for him. The man had hidden it skilfully, but now it stalked abroad, naked, insolent. He wondered whether Nicode were quite sane. Perhaps his greed, his inordinate longing for the gold which Traquair had promised him, had turned his brain. Traquair reflected that he was stronger than Nicode. If it came to a fight he could crush the smaller man, squeeze the life out of him as a boy squeezes the juice out of an orange. Then he remembered Nicode's erstwhile profession, and frowned. These mountebanks never forgot their tricks of wrestling and tumbling. Nicode's muscles were like steel and his body was as lithe as a cat's. What was he doing now? What was he planning?

Was that somebody outside the door?

Traquair sat up in his bunk. His hand slid under his pillow and found his gun. He must be getting nervous. He set his teeth and tried to still the sudden trembling in his legs. Surely he could hear someone breathing. What cursed nonsense to think he could hear that through a stout door. He'd be seeing ghosts next. Where was that draught coming from?

His door was a sliding door, with bolts at top and bottom. He remembered he had not shot them when he turned in, sodden and weary, expecting to be called on deck at any moment. If someone had begun to push the door aside with slow laborious quietness, that would account for the draught that played about his face.

There came the noise that comes when a man shifts his foot to ease his position. Then someone was moving the door. How wide was it open? Was there room yet for the nose of a gun? It would not need to be open very far for that. A shot in the dark—a blind shot—wouldn't stand much chance of finding its mark. But Nicode would take care to aim low. . . .

Traquair's nerves gave way. Leaning down he seized one of his heavy sea boots and flung it with all his might at the unseen door. It crashed on the panels with a deafening noise. He sprang from his bunk, gun in hand, and pushed the door open. But there was no one outside. The narrow passage leading to the main cabin was deserted. With hands that shook ever so slightly he struck a light. There were footprints on the floor. They were those of his own boots, wet, distinct, leading to his door. But there was one that was different, one faint impression of a bare foot, wet perhaps from a chance encounter with his own damp footprints, that pointed away from the door.

He had not been mistaken. Barefoot as he was, coatless, slack-braced, he went on deck. The night was still dark. The lessening wind drummed against the sails. Tali was on deck, and Nicode was steering. The Kanaka boy hurried forward with anxious inquiry.

"Everything all right?" called Traquair.

"All right," answered Nicode's sulky voice. "It's not your trick yet, is it? I don't make it but twenty-five to two."

"I can't sleep," said Traquair shortly. "We'll change now. Tali, you go fetch coat belong me all same quick."

"Well, please yourself," said Nicode and went below. Traquair, listening, heard him shut his door. A moment later came the faint grind of bolts.

So Nicode was afraid, was he?

CHAPTER VIII

DERELICT

IT HAPPENED in McGinty's watch. So intent was he on keeping the *Nancy Q* on her course that he had no ears for any sound but the song of the wind in the shrouds. The thousand noises of shipboard, the creakings, groanings, rumblings, passed him by, unheard. It was not strange, then, that a sudden crash should escape his notice, especially as it came from the Kanakas' quarters.

Moawa was a quarrelsome brute. His mother had come from the New Hebrides, those sinister islands where strange things still happen. His grandfather had been a man-eater. His surly ways enraged his light-hearted companions. With the malice of small boys they delighted in teasing him, knowing that no one would take his part. Secure in their immunity, they baited him as one baits a hound, until the creature's furious lunges snap its chain.

Occasionally Moawa ran amok. It had happened before. On that night it happened again. Some wanton, mischievous trick of Kukeke's set him in a berserk fury. With a bellow of rage he put his head down and rushed at his tormentor. Like a tornado he swe[illegible] round the narrow space, leaving destru[illegible] his wake. Kukeke took refuge [illegible] v. Moawa pursued him, inten[illegible] killing his enemy. What was it t[illegible] his swinging fist sent the hanging [illegible] h a crash to the floor? Heedless o[illegible] rified wails he battered at [illegible] ing nothing for the leaping tongu[illegible] me until they licked his bare ank[illegible] The sudden pain brought him to himse[illegible].

Carver, sound asleep, was awakened by the cry dreaded most of all by seamen. He leapt to his feet and began pulling on his boots. C[illegible] with terror, Kukeke rushed do[illegible] anion.

"[illegible] screamed. "Moawa he make [illegible] e burn, burn Kukeke, burn Ka[illegible] *[illegible]anitee Kiau*——"

"Shut u[illegible] er. He pushed him aside and w[illegible]'s door. With all his force he d[illegible] e panels.

"Get up, we'r[illegible]

He did not wa[illegible] appear, but dashed up the comp[illegible] eke at his heels. Smoke was ris[illegible] from the forecastle. Frantic figure[illegible] here and there. A confused medley [illegible] ote the air, and above it all ra[illegible]'s voice, raised in blasphemous [illegible] ion. His words fell on deaf ears. [illegible] wo things which the Kanaka fears n[illegible] re fire and darkness. The combination [illegible] he two terrors found Carver's boys pa[illegible] stricken. Deaf and blind to all else but the fear of destruction, they ran madly from one end of the ship to the other, ignoring Carver's threats and McGinty's monotonous cursing. Under their feet the deck was smouldering. Desperately McGinty lashed the tiller and sprang to Carver's aid.

"You blasted heathen," he shouted at Moawa. "I'll flog you for this. Buckets, damn you; go fetch one two fella buckets, fetch every one fella bucket!"

It was useless. They charged about like horses in a burning stable. In vain Carver drew his gun and fired at the deck as their running feet went by. In despair he grabbed a bucket that stood by the mast and caught up a coil of rope. Judith was by his side, shouting something at him. Three times she said it before the words penetrated his mind.

"Where are the other buckets?"

"In the galley," he shouted back. "No good trying for them."

"Buckets!" McGinty was yelling. "Where the hell are the buckets?"

They made him understand at last. Smoke was belching from the hold. The coughing, spluttering Kanakas screamed wildly as a lick of flame cut the gray mass. Carver was right. It was hopeless to attempt to enter the galley. He did indeed peer down the forescuttle, only to be convinced of the uselessness of the idea. His foot struck on something. It was a dipper that Kukeke had left lying on deck. McGinty had been scouring the ship in a frantic search. He had found a can and he was busy tying a rope to it. Judith was toiling manfully with the sorry means at her command, saturating the deck with bucketful after bucketful of water. It could not have much effect, thought Carver. Nothing they could do would be of any use. The fire had got too firm a hold. He went to McGinty.

"What's the use of this perishin' can now I've found it?" demanded McGinty. "Huh, what good's that dipper you're holdin'? We might as well try to put it out with thimbles."

Suddenly a thought struck him.

"What's the boys doin'?"

Carver's mouth set in a hard line. His hand went to his gun. This time he would not fire at the deck. The terrified voices were still raised in shrill screams, but now his ears caught a different note. They sounded—exultant. A swirl of smoke brought the tears to his eyes. When it cleared he realized the cause of that curious triumphant sound.

They had remembered the longboat. In frantic haste they began to launch it. Carver sprang for them, shouting to McGinty for help. It was like charging half a dozen maddened bulls. He fired, and Hoake, a Wakatea boy, crumpled up without a sound. But before he could fire again his gun went spinning out of his hand and he sprawled on deck. For a moment the pain in his head obscured everything else. Then he groped his way upright again, and became aware of McGinty vaulting over the cabin-head. But it was too late. With a yell of exultation the last of the Kanakas disappeared over the side of the ship. For a little while the longboat could be seen, a darker blot in the darkness, until it was lost in the night.

Carver's head cleared. He fought back the pain as McGinty came up, hoarse with imprecations.

"Chuck it," Carver advised. "Save your breath."

"What for?" demanded McGinty bitterly. "Why don't you tell me to start learnin' the harp while there's time?"

If they could keep the fire under hatches there was still a chance. But it was a slim one. In the hold the flames raged furiously. And everywhere, creeping between the planks, came the crawling stifling smoke, in twirls and spirals that choked and blinded. Now and again a thread of flame showed and vanished. The wind was freshening. It became imperative to take in sail. All three of them bent to the task. It left them spent and gasping, but at last they had the *Nancy Q* under bare poles. If the flames spread above deck there must be nothing for them to take hold of.

McGinty stubbed his toe against a still body. It groaned. Looking down he saw it was Kukeke. McGinty propped him up in a sitting position against the cabin-head. The ship was rolling, rolling, with a queer unsteady motion that turned their hearts sick. A wave splashed over the deck, swamping it, drawing a sharp hissing sound from the heated timber. The roar of the sea answered the roar of the fire that blazed under the hatches. Already the fire was leaking through the boards.

The dancing flames shone madly in the night. Their light fell on Judith and Carver, working frantically with their makequate implements to keep the fire from spreading above deck. There came an ominous crackling sound, the sound of wood burning, with occasional pistol shots as the knots in the tough oak yielded. McGinty, pausing with a bucket near the forescuttle, had a narrow escape. The plank on which he stood crumpled and broke, splintered by the heat below. He sprang back in time, and his shouts brought the others at a run.

"Look out where you step! She's like a bit of pie-crust just here."

They shrank back, appalled by a swift glimpse of the blaze that raged underneath.

THE first breach had been made. In less than five minutes the flames were reaching out their arms over the deck. The rising wind fanned their energy, urging them to stretch farther still. A stray wave might extinguish them for a moment, but they rose again, higher, more fierce. The after part of the deck was a writhing mass. From the cabin-head came spurts of flame. On every side lurked danger. Death called to them from the sea and from the fire. It seemed inevitable that they must answer. Carver made up his mind that they must try the last refuge of all. If that failed . . .

"The mast," he said. "Judith, go up first. And hurry!"

It was lucky, she thought, that Nicode had taught her to climb. Up and up she went, gripping the slippery wood with knees and arms, up towards the stars, whose secrets she might know before the dawn. Somewhere below she could hear McGinty yelping strange oath-spattered prayers, "Oh, Gawd, get us out of this blasted mess! Oh, *Gawd,* get us out of this!"

Carver was behind her, urging her higher and higher still. She knew why. He was afraid the mast would give way. If it fell, they must go with it. Better, then, to fall clear of the burning ship than to meet death—the other way. The sea offered them one chance in a thousand; the fire, none at all.

"Stop there," came Carver's voice. She felt his hands fumbling about her. He held a rope.

"The mast'll give us fair warning," he said, guessing her thoughts. "You'll fall with the sway of the ship unless you have this round you. There'll be time to cut it."

She suffered him to pass the rope around her body. McGinty, clawing and sweating lower down, ran his head smartly into Carver's leg.

"You got a rope?" shouted Carver.

"No. Gimme the end of yours. That'll do."

With many grunts he passed the rope round his body and the mast. Far below the wretched Kukeke, conscious now, whined and howled as he tried to scramble up the mast. Driven now at the will of the wind, the *Nancy Q* floundered on, rolling heavily. Aloft in the darkness the clinging figures swayed and lurched with the swaying mast, till Judith turned dizzy with the thresh of the night air as they hung there in peril between the sea and the sky. If only the cursed darkness would lift! But the endless night dragged on. Their heated bodies grew cold as the wind struck on their sodden clothes, chilling them to the bone. McGinty relapsed into a hard monotony of oaths. The flames were eating the heart of the ship, tearing it in pieces with their hungry jaws. Could the mast hold out? Would the iron housing at its base prove able to resist the fierce heat?

"Don't look down," said Carver to Judith suddenly. "For the love of Mike, keep your eyes shut. You'll go queer if you keep looking down. You needn't get scared [illegible] got you."

H[illegible] [illegible]rcled her, and around th[illegible] bodie[illegible] [illegible]rope that bound [illegible] to the ma[illegible] together, th[illegible] [illegible] were en[illegible] throu[illegible] [illegible] single nig[illegible] [illegible] spoke. [illegible] [illegible]an a ag[illegible] [illegible]y had ceased [illegible] Dum[illegible] [illegible]here, watching [illegible] [illegible]es that ached a[illegible]. Some[illegible] [illegible]eneath, Kukeke clutched the ma[illegible] [illegible]nes he slid back, and clambered [illegible] [illegible]hrieking with fear. If the m[illegible] [illegible]d but come . . .

"Are you cold?" said C[illegible] [illegible]ly. For answer there was a fain[illegible]

"Judith," he begged anxiou[illegible] start crying. You'll give us th[illegible] Besides, you'll scare yourself wo[illegible] you are now."

The slim figure in his arms shook [illegible] suppressed sobs. Carver felt helpless. He longed to comfort her, but how could he? What comfort remained in this black chasm of the haunted night? Never until that moment had he realized the sweetness of life.

"I wish I'd been killed in that scrap off the Carolines with Larry Jensen," came McGinty's raucous voice. "Do you know what's goin' to happen to this perishin' craft? She'll burn herself out and then we'll be waterlogged. Yes, we damn well shall. Drift about the Pacific till we die of thirst. Maybe they'll find us like they found the cook of the *Mary Ellen*, a bloomin' skeleton tied to the mast head. I saw him an' his bones was picked as clean as a knife. Sea eagles and frigate birds, most likely."

"Oh, stow that talk," said Carver impatiently. He felt Judith shivering in his arms. Far away to the east the blackness was streaked with gray. His heart gave a leap.

"Buck up," he said to Judith, "it'll soon be morning."

An indescribable wail floated up from below.

"What's that?" demanded Carver.

"It's Kukeke," said McGinty. "The poor devil's tryin' to climb up. He must have got knocked out right at the beginning. I ran my foot on him a while ago. Hell, but I'm cold. Blow me if I wouldn't go down and give him a boost up, if I could undo the rope."

"You keep still! Neither one of you would get up again. Let him be. It'll be morning soon. If he can hang on till then we'll hike him up when we get thawed."

He shouted encouragingly to Kukeke. Judith heard him in a dream. The flames were almost out. Here and there they still sputtered. But their strength was gone. Looking back, the night seemed merely a blur of horror. Was it possible that a day or two before she had been in Waihiti? Into what strait had her mad adventure led her? She shuddered as the biting wind pierced her thin clothes. Carver's arms tightened about her. She could feel the beating of his heart against her shoulder. How slow the dawn was! McGinty was numb with cold. He ceased his grumbling. Painfully he tried to rub one leg against the other in a vain attempt to find warmth.

II

DAWN came at last, the splendid, spectacular dawn of the tropics. Slowly the sea turned from black to blue. The sun rose in a riot of color. The huddled figures on the mast shifted their cramped bodies this way and that to catch the warmth. Their eyes, red and sunken with sleeplessness, sought the great ball as a worshiper seeks the face of his saint. The wind had dropped to a light breeze. All around them the sea spread till it met the sky. There was no land to break the curve of the horizon, nor any masts to show black against the paling heaven.

McGinty had prophesied correctly. The fire had burned itself out at last and the ship floated derelict, waterlogged. The lazy green combers washed over what was left of the deck. Looking down at the wreckage in the charred hold, the watchers realized that their only chance lay in being sighted by a passing ship. To each of them the slenderness of this chance was apparent. The rising sun shone on their pallid faces, and showed them the despair in each other's eyes.

Morning wore on. The first glow hardened into brazen heat. Higher and higher rose the sun, a burning ball in a cloudless sky. By ten o'clock the heat had grown intense. Their eyes ached with the intolerable monotony of blue. McGinty had climbed down and hauled the half drowned Kukeke into comparative safety. There was only a slight breeze and Carver thanked the gods that it was so. Who could say what a heavy wind would do to the *Nancy Q* in her present state? His greatest fear was that they might catch a capful of wind broadside on. This would mean that the ship would heel over . . .

"Ain't it queer?" said McGinty suddenly. "The only bit of dryness for pretty well a hundred miles is this mast. How's Judith?"

"All right," said Judith valiantly.

"You're dead game," McGinty admitted. "Yes, fer a female you're damned plucky. Women ain't much good when things is happenin' as a rule. I mind when I was working the old *Harriet* between Wakatea and Amanu, along of Tracy. We shipped a passenger or two at Amanu one time. Just off Saovo we run into a hell of a storm. Waves fit to wash you straight through the pearly gates, an' wind that would lift an ox. Well, we fought it best way we could, till we was all hoarse and raw and stupid. 'Boats,' says Tracy at last, and the Kanakas started to lower the dingey. All this time the passengers—some government chap and his wife—they'd been shut down in case they got in the way. So I yelled to 'em to come out slippy. Mind you, we'd shipped half the Pacific, and the topmast was gone. And still they didn't come out of their cabin. The dingey was holding on by the Kanakas' nails, and Tracy's language was enough to stop the storm. Well, I went down to see why they preferred drownin' and I kicked the door in. 'Come out, you fools,' I roared at 'em, and the little chap rushed out, scared to death. And she? Huh! 'Wait a minute,' she says in a high an' mighty voice. 'I had to change my stockings. The ones I put on first were slightly damp!' Da—well, I ask you! I kicked him up the companion, and I slung her over my shoulder the way you might sling a sheep, and up after him to the deck. We fell into the dingey just as they were puttin' off. Two days we were afloat, and if ever a woman was a busted nuisance, she was. We'd got half a cask of water, and she raised Cain because Tracy swore at her when she wanted to wash herself. 'I've never been spoken to like that in my life,' she says, all bristling up. 'Life?' said Tracy. 'You ain't alive, ma'am. Your sort's born dead.' However, she got sobered down afore we were picked up. Hunger will sober most folks, and no one in the world can stand up against thirst."

He stopped at that word, and Judith set her teeth. Ever since sunrise she had put the fear of thirst resolutely at the back of her mind, daring it to come out from its hiding place. Now like some evil menace, it crept forth, defiant, inescapable. Carver shifted uneasily. His dry throat tormented him without ceasing. His tongue felt rough and swollen against his palate. On his lips the salt from the flying spray had caked in a fine white dust. Morning, and the sun's power . . . midday and the sun's fury . . . afternoon and the sun's pitiless cruelty. So the day wore on, till their bodies grew slack and lifeless, their eyes blind with watching for the sail that did not come. A shark's fin flashed through the water, a sign that their watch was shared. Death would be quick that way, anyhow, quicker than choking out their lives in three days' time in the sweltering heat. How long could one hang onto life? They said the *Mary Ellen's* cook must have lived eight days. Eight days . . .

"I'd give me eyes for a swig of beer," came from McGinty. "Not rum nor yet whisky, but good old English beer in a china mug. There used to be a pub down Wapping way . . ."

He wandered off into reminiscence. The hoarse voice went on and on. The language grew more and more crude. But Judith shook her head when Carver would have stopped him.

"Let him go on," she whispered. "Do you think I've never heard men talk before?"

Neither of them had spoken of Traquair for many hours. But as they clung together in their peril the thought of him loomed large before each of them. Where had he gone and why? More potent still remained the question of his return. Would he come back to Parawa? If so, he must come by the way he had gone. Carver frowned at the idea that their possible salvation lay with the man he had sworn to kill. Yet if by any wild chance the thing happened . . .

At last it grew cooler. The sun began its triumphant descent into a western sky where a gorgeous confusion of color waited. With the dusk came a cooling breeze that brought new life to the exhausted derelicts. The sea deepened from purple into black. The moon came up out of the dark, fat and round and golden. Kukeke began a low wailing, a monotonous heartbreaking sound, till McGinty kicked him savagely into silence.

But the coolness of sunset changed to biting cold as the night wore on. The welcome breeze stiffened into a wind that set them swaying perilously, and chilled their stagnant blood. Hunger and thirst, fatigue and cramp, raised mocking heads, jeering at them through the darkness. The wind remained constant, driving them slowly towards the northeast. Tentatively, Carver stretched one arm above his head and shouted at the pain. His shoulders felt as though some one had thrashed him with a dog-whip. Little stinging pains crept up his legs. The strain of standing on the narrow cross-trees had told on his bare feet. They were ridged and swollen, and the veins stood out as the veins will show on the feet of a man under torture. Judith's head rested wearily against his shoulder. He hoped desperately that she would sleep. All the rancor he had felt against her vanished as he remembered that other time when he had seen her asleep at Hogan's.

Hogan's! Had it all happened in some dim year that he had forgotten?

A sob from Judith brought him to himself.

"What is it?"

"It's my fault," sobbed Judith. "If I'd told you what you wanted to know, none of this would have happened."

"No use thinking of that," he said roughly. "We're here, and it's no use raising hell about it."

His brusqueness had the desired effect. She sniffed defiantly and he felt her grow taut. She did not speak again, but he knew she had overcome her weakness. He would not be surprised at any woman crying herself sick in such a predicament. But Judith—well, Judith was different.

"Go to sleep," he said. "It'll pass the time a bit."

Obediently she closed her eyes. But sleep refused to come. The swaying mast, the wind, the thousand dangers of the night, kept it at bay. Carver knew she was not asleep. Now and again he heard her catch her breath sharply. Towards midnight, his heart began to fail him. Twice he called to McGinty, and no answer came. The older man was sunk in a stupor. Carver was seized with a shivering fit, brought on by the intense cold and the privations of the day. In that hour he touched bottom. What a rotten way to die! What a rotten way! How long had the *Mary Ellen's* cook lingered? Eight days. Eight days' horror—was that what lay in store for him and for McGinty and—Judith?

Her voice cut across his whirling thoughts.

"You're awfully cold."

It was true. His body shielded hers from the wind. The bitter night air numbed him. His hands, which grasped the mast, lost their hold ever and again through sheer inability to grip.

"Shove one hand under the rope," said Judith. "That's it. Now give me the other."

In the darkness her hand closed over his. Close against her heart she pressed it, till the blood quickened again at the touch of the warm flesh and the limp fingers could move.

In Carver there awoke something new and strange and terrible, that cared nought for the dangers of the night, and made death itself of no account . . .

The leaden hours went by. Slowly, slowly the night passed, and the first faint flush of morning reddened the sky.

Who was this coming from the northeast? Who but Traquair hurrying south through the bloodshot dawn, with rage in his heart, and the life of a dead man staining his restless hands?

CHAPTER IX

RESCUE

FROM the first Nicode had protested that they were on a fool's errand. Distrust of Poldhu had bred in him a contemptuous skepticism. Traquair had crammed on the canvas and whipped the *Amaranth* through the dancing sea until they sighted Flanders Island in the early dawn. It was the most southerly of the Houten Group, a bare, rocky place, a haunt of sea birds. The only white was Lefroy, who did a thriving trade in guano, aided by nineteen Kanakas. He came down to the beach as the *Amaranth* glided into the shelving harbor. But there was no welcome in his eyes. He had met Traquair before.

Nicode, uneasy and distrustful, hung back while the two men exchanged sullen greetings. Lefroy was taciturn, Traquair suspicious. The Kanakas were clustered together, quick to see their master's distrust of the newcomer. Traquair's boys made fast the *Amaranth* to the rough stone pier that jutted out into the sea. The white men stepped ashore in silence. Lefroy wasted no time in false hospitality. He was a short, dark man, stoutly built, bearded, with little deep-set eyes as sharp as a rat's. He came to the point at once.

"Why have you come here?"

"We're looking for someone."

"Who?"

But Traquair countered with another question.

"Where's the *Concepcion?*"

"What's that to do with you anyhow?"

"Where is she?"

"She's after guano round the north side of the island," said Lefroy. "The boys took her round last night. Any more questions?"

There came a brief pause.

"Anyone been in this day or two?"

"No."

"Then I'm on a false scent," said Traquair.

"Come up to the house and have a drink," said Lefroy suddenly. He scented a mystery.

They went up a rough, stony path, bordered by calamus vine. A bush hen ran under Nicode's feet, squawking as he clapped his hands to scare it. Lefroy's house was built in a clearing. He had planted orange trees round it, and the golden fruit hung ripe and heavy. From one of them there flew out a sun bird, uttering its queer note as it passed.

"Who are you looking for?" demanded Lefroy, when the glasses were filled.

Traquair fixed his eyes on the other's face.

"Morton," he said slowly. "I've come north to find Morton. But you say no boat's been in."

Lefroy shook his head. "Why should he come here?"

"You used to run together," Traquair reminded him.

"But he's with Poldhu. I thought you and he and Poldhu——"

"We were. But that's finished. See here, Lefroy, I'm dead sure he's come north. Where would he come but here?"

The menace in his eyes was unmistakable. Lefroy flushed.

"Do you think I'm lying?"

"It would be dangerous to lie," returned Traquair. "But of one thing I am certain. He would find a man who had a fast ship. The *Seamew* is heavy and very slow. Who would lend him a quick-sailer but a friend? What friend has he got but you? And the *Concepcion* is nowhere to be seen."

Lefroy's temper rose.

"Who am I to lend the *Concepcion* to any son-of-a-gun who chooses to ask for her? I chucked Morton years ago because he was a thief. Yes, a rotten blackguard of a thief. And you've got the nerve to come here and suggest I'm helping him in some dirty job he's trying to get away with. Friend! He's no friend of mine. Any man that runs with Poldhu and—yes, and with you, is no friend of mine, nor of any decent man in the Islands. Lend him the *Concepcion!* I'll see him damned first."

Traquair smoked in silence. Not for one moment did he doubt that Lefroy was putting up an excellent piece of bluff. He tried to catch Nicode's eye. But Nicode was staring at the floor. His glass stood half empty before him. Plainly he was troubled. He had the heavy look of a man ill at ease in the presence of something that he fears. Traquair told himself he was a fool to have let Nicode in on this. You can deal with a fool, he reflected, and you can deal with a rogue. But with a coward, the next step is never certain. And what man but a coward would have come creeping in the darkness to Traquair's door? At the remembrance a smile twisted his lips. Surely that stamped Nicode for what he was. None but a poltroon will fight in the dark.

Lefroy was watching him. Curse his rat's eyes, they saw too much. Traquair knew that Lefroy had guessed how matters stood between himself and Nicode. For a moment he wondered whether Nicode would bid for an alliance. Such a thing was well within the bounds of possibility. Lefroy had old scores to pay off against Traquair. There had been a woman in Amanu, Traquair remembered. There were other matters, trade affairs, but that episode alone would have served to make them enemies.

The sun was high. Lefroy rose and pulled the shutters close to keep out the heat. Every time he moved, he kept his face towards Traquair. He had the watchfulness of a cat.

A Kanaka boy came running up from the beach. The echoes of shouts followed him. There had been a quarrel, and even then the combatants were locked in a deathlike embrace. Lefroy joined the sputtering youth and together they hurried away to stop the fight. Lefroy could ill afford to lose any hands.

LEFT alone Nicode and Traquair sat in silence broken only by the clink of bottle on glass. But Nicode's nerve was going.

"What are you going to do?"

"Wait till night. If the *Concepcion* hasn't come by then we'll know he's lying. Gone round after guano! Does he think he can double-cross me?"

"I think he's straight. I've told you——"

"You've told me a hell of a lot," interrupted Traquair. "Of course you've been right all along. Of course you're so damn clever you can see right into a man's mind. You think Poldhu's a liar, and Lefroy's a holy saint, and I'm a fool. All right. All right. Only don't say it again."

For answer Nicode went to the open door and stared at the sun-flecked sea. How long before it came to open conflict between him and Traquair? How long would they watch each other in this furtive, curious fashion? He began to fill his pipe with fingers grown suddenly nerveless. This island was haunted, haunted with the shadow of a thing yet to happen. Standing there in the sunlight he shivered with the chill of foreboding.

Lefroy came up from the beach, a morose look clouding his face.

"All right?" asked Nicode.

"No. One of the blamed fools used his knife."

"Anyone—dead?"

Strange how he shrank from that word.

"No, not dead. But two of 'em have got nasty wounds. It'll be a couple of weeks before they're a ha'p'orth of good. Traquair inside?"

Nicode nodded. Lefroy went past him and entered the room. The sound of voices drifted out to the listener. But he did not go in. He stayed in the sun, watching the gaudy parrots, the lean, rooting pigs, a fussy bush hen busy making a sand mound for her eggs. A Kanaka went by and Nicode followed the glistening body with his eyes until it disappeared from sight. These careless, brutish things filled him with a sense of envy. They had no troubles. It was enough for them that they were alive. For nearly an hour he stood there, watching the common everyday things that moved and breathed and had their being. Securely anchored, the *Amaranth* tugged impatiently at her ropes, as if she too were alive.

His mind left the present and went back by strange paths to the things he had forgotten. Last night, and his stealthy feet outside Traquair's closed door; Poldhu's hut and Poldhu himself, with his half-shut eyes; Judith and her slim, lithe body that he had trained to leap and climb and wrestle; Judith's mother; the old days with a traveling circus; a clown who had been killed in a tumbling act; and so back and back until he stood in a dream, unconscious that Traquair had come out of the hut and was watching him with a quizzical smile. Behind Traquair stood Lefroy.

But Lefroy was not looking at Nicode. His eyes went beyond, and in them was triumph. But he said nothing.

"You look half asleep," Traquair was saying to Nicode. "Thinking about your sins?"

Nicode shook his head. He to had seen what had brought that exultant look into Lefroy's face. Lefroy brushed past them and went down to the pier. He was hurrying, hurrying to meet the *Concepcion* as she came round the point with a lusty Kanaka in the bows waving his hands above his head as a sign that all was well.

At last Traquair raised his eyes. A dark flush spread over his face. He strode to a clearing among the trees where he could see better. Nicode followed him. In silence they stood there, watching the *Concepcion* as she curvetted and pranced towards the shore. As Poldhu had said, she was built for speed. It seemed a pity, thought Nicode, that she should be used for guano trading. There were so many things that Lefroy might have done with a ship like that. He became aware that Traquair was breathing heavily, like a man who has been running too fast. The flush had faded, leaving his face pale beneath its bronze. Into his eyes had come a look that was not good to see.

If the *Concepcion* was returning, then Morton had not come to Flanders Island. Lefroy had spoken the truth. Even that fool Nicode had been clever enough to smell out the rights of things. It was he, Traquair, who had been fooled. And by whom? "He's told you the truth nineteen times so that you'll believe him the twentieth," Nicode had said that. Yes, he had said that of Poldhu.

Poldhu . . .

At the name Traquair's rage leapt into a flame. It was a plot then, a plot between Poldhu and Morton. They were tired of him. They wanted to be rid of him. Had they hoped that between anger and suspicion he might force a quarrel with

Lefroy and not return again? But why? Why?

The answer sprang to his mind. What a fool, what a blind fool! It was not Morton who desired the Dreaming God.

Not Morton . . .

"You see, I was right," said Nicode. "Here's the *Concepcion* all right. Now where's your fool idea about Morton and his bloomin' boat? Tell you what," he went on, as a monstrous idea presented itself, "I reckon it's a put-up job. Yes, I do!"

He faced Traquair, pale, furious.

"It's a put-up job," he shouted again. "You damned swindler! What have you done with the Dreaming God? Where is it? Ah, lie to me again and say you don't know. Morton steal it! That's a good one, that is. Yes, that's funny. You and Poldhu thought this out damn well, didn't you? You an' me was to get out of the way while Poldhu and Morton—what are they doing? I suppose now you're convinced the *Concepcion* isn't half way to Honolulu with Morton aboard, that you'll pull a long face and say the thing's gone God knows where and Morton with it. Then you'll take me back to Waihiti and you'll go back to Parawa to pick up your share of the profits. Most likely you sold the damn idol months ago——"

The injustice of this attack smote Traquair between the eyes. Too late Nicode saw what he had done. Traquair turned on him and struck him on the mouth. Nicode leapt to meet the insult. All the brooding hatred, the sullen furtive jealousy, that lay between them, blazed up in sudden war.

Traquair was strong, but Nicode was his match. His body was tough and hard with years of strenuous muscular effort. He had perfect control over his limbs. And it was his second attempt. Not again must his heart fail him as it had failed him on the previous night. He must kill this time. But Traquair was strong. He had not realized how strong his adversary was, until the flail-like blows beat at his chest. The savage rage against Poldhu that filled Traquair's heart vented itself on Nicode. His great fists shot out, heedless of Nicode's skilful parrying and shrewd counter blows.

Traquair's shirt was torn and an ugly bruise showed on the right side of his chest. He broke through Nicode's defence again and again, till the shorter man's head whirled painfully at the smashing, tireless blows. If he could throw Traquair, he might have a better chance. Again and again he tried, thrusting his leg between Traquair's legs. But with all his skill he was not heavy enough. The other resisted with all his might. Nicode's breath was coming in broken whoops and gasps. He tried an upward thrust and felt Traquair's head jerk back. The next moment an intolerable pain shot through him, and he knew that his shoulder was dislocated. His left arm swung helpless and ineffectual. Panic seized him. Still he fought on, as a trapped rat will bare its teeth at the hand which seeks to destroy it.

Traquair flung him off and Nicode crashed back against a palm, shaking the blood out of his eyes, while his right hand crept towards his knife. From the pier came the shouts of the Kanakas as they welcomed the *Concepcion*. Overhead two pigeons flew screaming. The scent of the jasmine was thick and sweet. Nicode raised his head and looked round him as a man looks for the last time. Traquair was coming on again, his breath whistling through his nostrils, his eyes alight with the lust of battle. Stab, then, stab deep . . .

They closed for the last time, and Traquair's mighty arms circled Nicode's body, slippery with sweat through his torn shirt. Nicode's heart felt as though it were bursting. He cried out in agony as a rib gave way under the crushing weight. Putting all his strength into one supreme effort, he wrenched his arm free. The knife gleamed in the air. If he could reach Traquair's throat! The sickening pressure round his body relaxed. Traquair's arm shot out, reaching for the knife. In vain Nicode jerked himself back in a violent effort at frustration. Traquair bent over him. Each could feel the other's hot breath on his face. The ground was soft and Nicode's foot betrayed him as he staggered back. He fell heavily with Traquair beside him. But Traquair's iron hold never relaxed on Nicode's wrist.

Suddenly his body stiffened. Nicode was underneath, pinned down by his enemy's greater strength. Traquair lunged. His hand sprang from Nicode's wrist to his fingers, tearing them apart till he felt the handle hard and solid beneath his touch. As his tortured fingers unclosed Nicode fought blindly to reach Traquair's throat.

But it was too late. The savage triumph in Traquair's eyes could not be mistaken. His cruel lips were drawn back in a snarl. Like a wolf's his teeth showed white and sharp. He lifted his arm and struck once.

As sure as Traquair . . .

He left Nicode lying there, among the palms, and strode away towards the beach. On the way he stopped by a stream and washed his wet hands and his splashed face. Lefroy was aboard the *Concepcion* by this time. He saw Traquair go on board the *Amaranth*, whistling to his boys. They trailed after him unwillingly. Soon Lefroy saw that they were casting off. He hailed Traquair.

"Satisfied, eh?"

"Go to hell," rejoined Traquair.

"Where's Nicode?"

"Going to stay here for a while. I'm going to cruise round a bit to see if I can get news of Morton."

"I don't want Nicode hanging round here——"

"You've got to have him, then. We've had a row and he'll not sail with me this trip."

"How long shall you be? A week?"

"Maybe."

The *Amaranth* swayed to the breeze. Slowly she got under way and turned her head to the south. The abruptness of her departure startled Lefroy. He pulled at his beard hesitatingly. Yet what was it to him? Judging from Traquair's appearance there had been a bit of a scrap. He frowned at thought of Nicode's sulky company for as long as Traquair chose to stay away.

Where was Nicode? Lefroy's eyes scanned the shore. Nothing moved there. Perhaps he had gone back to the house. Perhaps he had strolled inland. Perhaps——

"Stop!" shouted Lefroy. But it was too late. The *Amaranth* was out of earshot. Lefroy left inspection of the cargo until later. He hurried ashore and went back to the house. It was still and empty. Putting his hands to his mouth he shouted Nicode's name. There was no answer. Running now, he began to search frantically, calling to the Kanakas. By and by he found Nicode, lying on his face, one arm flung outward. Lefroy spoke to him. Then he lifted him gently and brushed away the clinging mould from the slack mouth and sightless eyes. He looked out to sea, where the sails of the *Amaranth* showed white against the blue sky.

"So he's not sailing this trip?" he said aloud. "You're wrong, Traquair. He'll sail with you all the days of your life."

II

THE *Amaranth* scudded southwest like a frightened hare across the blue fields of the sea. Through the late afternoon she hurried, and all through the night. Traquair was sailing her four points within the wind. All night he stayed on deck, urging her towards Parawa. In his heart burned fierce hatred and rage. Poldhu, thief, teller of lies, what have you done with the Dreaming God of Fuchow? The Kanakas slunk about the deck with hushed voices and noiseless footsteps. When Traquair growled an order they sprang to obey. They had seen the mighty Tarakawa angry before. One of them still bore the memory of a bout of fury on his body. On into the night went the ship, with the wind thrumming among the cordage. Into Traquair's mind came the thought of Carver. What had happened to the *Nancy Q?* If she was still hanging about he would probably pass her. It was a straight course from Flanders Island to Parawa. It was rather strange that they had seen nothing of Carver up till then. Had he abandoned the chase? Had he lost them when the *Amaranth* made that detour in the night in order to throw him off the track? He might be lurking about still, undecided which way to take.

What the hell did Carver matter, anyway. It was the face of Poldhu that rose ever before him. There lay his goal. There stood the man who should pay for what he had done. And the Dreaming God, where was that? Poldhu knew. Then Poldhu should be made to speak. Traquair had never failed until then. No man had made a fool of him until then. Added to the fury that he felt against Poldhu, was the bitterness of knowing that he had been cheated.

Just before dawn he went below, leaving Tali at the helm with instructions to call him at once if the wind altered. In his cabin he threw off his boots and lay down to snatch a couple of hours' rest. As soon as his head touched the pillow he fell asleep.

He awoke to the sound of stealthy footsteps outside his door. One of the Kanaka boys had come to wake him then. The rascal must have opened the door, because he felt a thin draught blowing.

"All right," he shouted and sprang from his bunk.

But there was no one outside.

He swore vigorously and went back to bed. When the dawn stained the sky, Tali came tumbling down the companion in haste. He hammered at the door.

"Oh, Tarakawa, come quick! Look out him see boat all drowned one fella mast him stick up."

Traquair hastened on deck. A derelict? Yes. Far to the southwest, dead in their course they could see a lonely mast shivering against the sky. Figures were clinging to it—two—three men. From their attitudes Traquair judged they were pretty well done. There was nothing to tell what ship it was, nor how she had come to be in that condition. There had been no storm. Undoubtedly she was waterlogged, through some accident. He called for Tali to bring the glass.

For a long time he held it to his eye. When he put it down at last, his face was set. So that was why Carver had given up the chase. So much was plain. The thing that he could not understand was the presence of Judith. What was she doing there? But he frowned over the question in vain. No possible solution occurred to him, nor could he conjecture any reason why she should have gone aboard the *Nancy Q.* He gave orders for the longboat to be got ready. The excited Kanakas bustled about willingly.

They drew near enough for Traquair to send out a long wailing "Ahoy" over the water. A faint reply came back.

"Tali," said Traquair, "you come fetch me all same time you see boat?"

"All same time quick," agreed Tali.

"Not come before, long time before?"

"No, Tarakawa."

"You fetch boy come before."

Tali went, and returned, puzzled.

"Tarakawa, all boy say not come fetch Tarakawa before Tali came."

"The liars," said Traquair. "Someone was prowling about outside my door. If any of 'em are up to any tricks I'll flay 'em."

They came within a stone's throw of the *Nancy Q,* as she rolled and heaved in the trough of the waves. The longboat was lowered. Four Kanakas went to the oars and Traquair sat in the stern, his heart beating quickly, his eyes fixed on that slight, clinging figure in Carver's arms.

Cautiously they drew alongside the flooded remnant of the *Nancy Q's* deck. With infinite care they went aboard, Tali took out his knife, and held it in his teeth. Then he began to climb towards those numb bodies whose fingers were powerless to undo the ropes that bound them. The sun rose above the horizon, as the four of them were lowered slowly to Traquair's waiting arms and placed in the longboat, where Rapuhi began to chafe their limbs zealously. Carver came last, his face old and white with anxiety and hardship. But courage indomitable gleamed in his eyes as he faced Traquair. The old defiance, the old hatred, leapt up between the two men. It was gall to Carver that Traquair should have given him the years to come. Rather would he have died clinging to the mast with Judith in his arms than be beholden to his enemy.

Judith . . .

He had seen the man's eyes as Traquair caught Judith in his arms and lifted her into the longboat. What he read there told him that there was a new cause of striving between them. Jealous rage seized him as he saw Traquair rubbing Judith's hand between his own great palms.

It was queer that no one spoke except the Kanakas. The longboat pushed off. Kukeke and McGinty lay where they had been put. McGinty was not conscious. Carver himself rocked drunkenly in the stern-sheets, trying hard to keep erect. Judith lay slackly in Traquair's arms, with his coat wrapped round her. It seemed an interminable while before they drew alongside the *Amaranth.* Dusky faces peered down at them. Willing arms were stretched out to help them. The Kanakas unshipped their oars.

"Go up," said Traquair curtly to the boys. They hesitated a minute and then clambered aboard. Traquair raised Judith in his arms. The risen sun fell redly on her white face and her hair. From above Tali held out reverent hands to receive her. Still supporting her, Traquair swung himself slowly on board. There remained in the longboat Kukeke, McGinty, and Carver. The *Amaranth* began to move.

"Hey," protested Carver weakly. "McGinty and I can't—we can't get aboard—by ourselves."

Traquair leaned over the side of the ship.

"You're not coming aboard," he said.

CHAPTER X

THE LOVE OF TRAQUAIR

BY THE time McGinty regained consciousness the *Amaranth* was out of sight. Exhausted by useless cursing, Carver sat with his head in his hands. At McGinty's feeble movements he got up and moved unsteadily to the locker. Here he found half a jar of water in a wicker case, and a tin containing ship's biscuits. He soaked a biscuit in water and propped McGinty in his arms, where he fed him like a child till the elder man's strength came creeping back. Kukeke snatched at a sopped biscuit and went at it with dog-like ferocity. Presently McGinty sat up and looked round.

"What boat's this?"

"The *Amaranth's* longboat."

"*What?* Mean to say we've been picked up by a bloomin' longboat? Where's the *Amaranth* then?"

"Out of sight. Making for Parawa."

It took a long time to make McGinty understand. When he had grasped the facts he turned puce color and took a deep breath. Then he let it out again.

"No," he said sadly. "Nothin' I could say would do justice to it. If old Cap'n Henderson of the *Queen* was here, he might do something about it. He could swear in English, American, Dutch and Spanish. I've timed him, and he's spoke steady for seventeen minutes and a half without repeatin' himself. But me—well, I ain't got no words. Gawd Almighty, if I'd got Traquair where I could reach him!"

"I've said it all," said Carver wearily. "Kukeke, you not eat any more, not drink any more. Keep water, keep bisikit by and by night-time."

"Strike me," went on McGinty, "did you ever hear such a trick in all yer born days? Where's Judith?"

"On the *Amaranth*."

McGinty eyed him shrewdly.

"Ho, she is, is she?"

His glance roved round the boat. He spotted the oars.

"Provided there ain't no wind," he said, "we might row a bit. Waihiti's about two hundred and fifty to the northwest. Aye, northwest it'll be for us. We'll maybe stand a chance of gettin' picked up. I'm all right again now. The sun's warmed me up."

He thought: "Carver feels bad about Judith. Mustn't let him get thinkin' too much."

They had enough water and biscuits in the *Amaranth's* longboat to last them for three days. If they could get a bit nearer to the trade route they stood a chance of being picked up. Their chief danger now lay in the wind which blew freshly and brought great splashes of water over the gunwale. The sun was high and beat on them fiercely. Despite his first frenzied drink Carver's throat burned unbearably. The ceaseless splashing of the waves acted on him as a lullaby. But he knew there must be no sleep yet. If they could row in the direction of Waihiti, however remote it was, they would stand a chance of sighting a vessel.

What was the use of it all? Judith was with Traquair. She loved him. Hadn't her love for him, her refusal to betray his whereabouts, led them all into this mess? What was she doing at that moment? At the thought Carver snatched at the oars and began to row, weakly, making little progress. Yet he persisted, welcoming any fatigue that would drive out the flaming thoughts from his mind. He loved her. He had loved her when he caught sight of her asleep at Hogan's. He acknowledged it to himself as he strained at the heavy oars. On board the *Nancy Q* desire had awakened. His roughness towards Judith had masked a fierce longing to hold her in his arms, to cover that white throat with his kisses. McGinty had known that when they found Judith in the hold. "You're in love," he had said. He had been joking, but Carver knew he had hit on the truth.

Did she care for him? Could she ever care for Traquair's enemy? Carver laughed bitterly at the question. No woman could resist Traquair. Yet himself and Judith had shared peril together. And what a plucky little devil she had been! A rush of pride mingled with his longing. The blood sang in his veins as he remembered how her heart had beat under his hand. Would she have done what she had unless she—well, unless she regarded him with something besides hatred? On the other hand it might have been the sexless impulse that prompts one shipwrecked creature to help another, careless of the means.

And now she and Traquair . . .

"Hey," shouted McGinty in a cracked voice, "go easy, Carver! You ain't strong enough yet to handle them oars. Better rest a bit. We'll row when the sun's lower."

Kukeke was baling, slowly, doggedly, with a noggin that they had found in the locker. His shiny brown back straightened and bent, straightened and bent, as he worked. Carver shipped the oars. McGinty was at the tiller, doing his best to head the longboat towards distant Waihiti. It was nearly noon and the sun scorched them until their ragged clothes hung limp and draggled with sweat. The long hot hours merged into an endless stubborn defiance of the elements. They spoke little. As the wind dropped, towards three o'clock, there was no more need for baling. The boat ceased to ship water. After centuries, the incarnadined sea told them that the sun was westering.

"When I was in 'Frisco once," said McGinty, "I had what they call a Turkish bath. Three dollars the time. They fixed it so you got hotter an' hotter till you reached boilin' point and then they chucked you into cold water. Well, we're gettin' ours free. If ever I see 'Frisco any more, Jim don't get me into his Turk bath no more. I'm goin' to join a Polar exploration next time. Think of layin' out on a slab of ice takin' pot shots at walruses!"

Carver made no answer. He was reaching for the water jar. In silence they drank the meager share which he measured out in the noggin. There were two biscuits apiece. Carver wolfed his hungrily. McGinty regarded the battered specimens in his hand with dubious eyes.

"I can't eat 'em," he said. "My innards is gone slack."

"Don't be a fool," retorted Carver with his mouth full."

"You eat one," said McGinty, persuasively. "You need the most strength. I'll eat the other one."

He flung it across to Carver and began to bite slowly at the one that was left. But his very slowness betrayed him. His air of distaste was too elaborate to be real.

"You'll share alike," Carver told him grimly, handing back the biscuit. "Chew it up and quit talking nonsense."

McGinty shrugged his shoulders, and took it without comment. Carver thought: "He's as hungry as I am. But he thinks because I'm young I ought to have the best chance."

IN THE early dusk they bent themselves to the oars, steering a course as best they knew how towards Waihiti. At any other time they would have been in despair at the peril in which they found themselves. But compared with the danger they had escaped, their present situation had its advantages. Of all the gates that Death holds open there is none so terrible as fire. If they were to die, the sea held for them a swift, cool end.

The oars rose and fell slowly, and the rowers rested often. They must hoard their failing strength. There was the morrow to face and the next day, and perhaps the day after that. Carver decided that three days would see the end of them. If they were not picked up by then, they would not be picked up alive. His mind went back to Judith and he felt the blood rising to his face. All his heart cried out for her. For the first time in his life he was in love, and the strange sweet pain mastered him. Bitterly he regretted adventures with women who mattered less than nothing. Yet what was the use? He would never be able to tell Judith, to bow his head over her little cool hands in a plea for forgiveness. He would never see her blue eyes grow troubled at his words. It was Traquair, Traquair who was the end of her existence. Had she not risked everything to take him warning? And now she and Traquair were together.

Traquair . . .

The word was a call to arms, a clarion that sounded, bringing old memories of his enemy's insolence and cruelty. He flung off the sick despair that crept about him out of the darkness. There must be no giving up. He must live. He must fight the terrors of the sea—starvation, thirst, wreck, the burning sun, the deadly cold. He must conquer them, because life held Judith. He must hear from her own lips that she loved Traquair. Surely she must know by now what sort of man he was? If her eyes had been shut before, they must be opened now. To abandon shipwrecked men ranked high in the crimes of the sea. Carver must live, that he might yet take Traquair by the throat, and wrest from him the two things dearest in the world, Judith and the Dreaming God of Fuchow.

Had Traquair found the secret of the Dreaming God? And what had he done with the idol? Did he keep it hidden where he might gloat over its beauty, or had he sold it? Perhaps at that very moment some pork-packer in Chicago was soiling it with his greasy hands, patting it appraisingly as one pats a dog. Carver's lips tightened. By God, he'd make a damned good fight for it yet!

"Carver," came McGinty's voice, "did you see Nicode?"

"Where?"

"When the *Amaranth* come along."

"No," said Carver, after a moment's thought. "That's rather queer. He wasn't there."

"Not there? Where was he? Stayed aboard?"

"I don't know. I suppose so—and yet it's queer, seeing Judith was with us. You'd have thought he'd have been the first one into the *Nancy Q.*"

"You'd think so."

"Well, he wasn't. I never set eyes on him. But if he wasn't there, where is he now?"

"Kukeke," said Carver suddenly, "you savee Nicoti?"

"Savee Nicoti," answered Kukeke weakly.

"You see Nicoti all along Tarakawa same time *Amaranitee* come find *Nanitee Kiau?*"

"No, Kahiva. Tarakawa he all same damn bad," said Kukeke. "Suppose he die, he go hell all same quick. Tarakawa he savee Kukeke, he all same angry, he say Kukeke bad sail all along Kahiva."

The plaintive voice died away. The riddle of Nicode's whereabouts was not solved. But the solution ceased to matter, swallowed up in the greater riddle of their own existence in the near future.

Dawn found them exhausted and hollow eyed. The dreaded sun climbed with relentless steps till he stood high above their heads, trampling them under his brazen heels. Kukeke had started moaning and neither kicks nor blows could stop him. The helpless wail went on and on, mingling with the slapping sounds of the waves against the sides of the boat. Carver and McGinty crouched in the meager shelter of the thwarts, with their torn shirts pulled over their heads in a desperate attempt to avoid sunstroke. They spoke little. There was nothing to say.

Just after midday the wind rose again. It brought a slight relief from the overpowering heat, but it meant an added danger. The waves increased in force. Up and down, up and down, like a cork tossed on the water, the longboat struggled gallantly onwards. Baling began again, and had to be continued at intervals all day long. The weakened bodies sagged under the strain.

"Ain't there no perishin' ships in the Pacific?" demanded McGinty irritably. "If we was runnin' rum or guns or powder we'd meet every bloomin' boat between here and 'Frisco. If I ever get out o' this, I'm goin' to write me reminiscences. Old Cap'n Parker to Wawana did that after a typhoon. Pounds he got. Pounds an' pounds."

"You wouldn't get believed," Carver told him. "No one would believe any man would treat us the way Traquair treated us."

"They would if they knew Traquair," McGinty retorted, wiping the spray out of his eyes.

Carver did not answer. His eyes were fixed on the unbroken horizon. How long would they be able to hold out? McGinty looked white and dazed. His hands had begun to twitch. Kukeke's wailing never stopped. Before Carver's eyes a mist rose. He blinked rapidly and it cleared. He rose unsteadily to his feet and looked around with hopeless certainty that he would see nothing but sea and sky. The torrid day limped towards evening. Just before sunset they ate and drank greedily. When they had finished Carver said abruptly, "Five biscuits and about half a pint. After that——"

He stopped. There was no need to finish.

"Guess I can row a bit," he said.

fumbling for the oars with hands that were weak and uncertain.

"Wind's too high," said McGinty.

He was right. Carver had not the strength to battle with the waves. Dusk set in. The pattern of the stars showed brighter in the deepening sky. So many and so bright were they that Carver failed to notice two that were different from the rest, one red and one green, that moved slowly onwards far away to the south.

It was McGinty who saw them first. He gave a strangled howl and sprang to his feet.

"Gawd, it's a ship!"

Carver felt himself trembling.

"Will she see us?"

"How the hell can she see us? What do you think we are? A bonfire?"

"She's making this way though," said Carver after a pause. "Going to Waihiti, I should say."

Breathless with hope they watched the lights growing larger. But it became apparent that the ship would pass them. They were out of her course.

"If we only had a flare!" said Carver. "She'll go past us."

"Got any matches?"

Carver pulled out a broken box with two vestas.

"What are you doing?"

McGinty made no answer. A ripping sound caught Carver's ear. McGinty had torn off his shirt and he was fixing it to the handle of an oar. It hung clumsily, a white blur in the gathering night.

"Now," breathed McGinty.

Swaying to the motion of the boat Carver cupped his hands. The first match broke and the blazing head fell to instant death in the water at the bottom of the boat. The second match burned steadily. With hands that trembled no longer Carver lifted it to the unwieldly bundle that flapped in his face. The stuff caught. It burned sulkily, threatening to smoulder uselessly on a damp patch. But the wind took it, bullying it, shaking it, till the leaping flame blazed high. Carver wrenched off his own shirt and tore it into strips which he flung at the top of the oar.

The red and green lights paused. Slowly the ship beneath them swung round. On and on she came, her lights piercing the darkness, like the eyes of God peering through the night for that which was lost.

In the chapters to follow, Traquair brings Judith to Parawa and seeks an accounting with Poldhu; while Carver gathers strength for his ultimate revenge.

By
POLLOK GUILER

A Yankee Man-o'-War's Man and

The BREATH of the DRAGON

TUGGING wearily at her anchor chains like a restless bull on a tether, the old gunboat, *El Carlos*—captured by Dewey at Manila, and since that time a unit of the U. S. Navy Patrol Force in interior China—swung grim and defiant off the American Consulate at Hankow. The yellow chow-chow water of the flooding Yangzte, carrying its dark secrets of Chinese mystery swiftly down to the Yellow Sea some six hundred miles below, swirled hungrily past her bows, leaving a muddy smear along her trim water lines.

Sweltering in his cabin belowdecks, the young skipper, Lieutenant Snyder, sat blinking sleepily at his slippered feet perched high on his desk. But recently detached from command of an active destroyer in the Asiatic Fleet, the skipper was half sorry that July afternoon that this cat-watching-at-a-mousehole job had been wished on him. As he listened half-heartedly to the plaint of his executive officer, who lounged on a transom on the outboard side of the stuffy, oven-like little room, he felt certain of it.

"Lord, but this is awful!" he broke in finally, mopping his head and neck with a bath towel lying handy in his lap, half hoping that the exec would take the hint and clear out.

"Don't I agree with you, though," the latter answered. "The weather and the situation, both. Here we sit day after day in this smelly curse of a place, waiting for something to happen—which it won't. If they would only slam a missionary or something, so we'd have an excuse to take our men ashore and clean up that bunch of agitators, it wouldn't be so bad. But hell!" he spat out the words, "I can't see any use in hangin' around here. I'm sick of the place. Anyway, the excitement's all over now. Everything is as quiet as a Sunday afternoon on a farm."

The scene that met the skipper's eye through the open port did seem a peaceful one. In the shade of the trees in the narrow parkway along the river bank a few dozen yards off the ship's side, leisurely Chinese in cool, flowing robes wandered aimlessly about, seriously engaged in their favorite pastime of carrying their singing birds out for a walk. Others, similarly enjoying themselves, squatted on their heels in the grass, chattering amiably. Beyond, the traffic along the bund moved lazily along to the accompaniment of screaming, creaking wheels; and the sun beat down unmercifully upon the bowed, sweating backs of the coolies laboring under the heavy loads.

The pugnacious *El Carlos*, with her bristling guns, seemed as much out of place as an armed sentry in a pew in church.

"There hasn't been a hostile move against foreigners for a month now," the executive returned to the attack. "Not since the limeys and Japs opened up on that bunch of cutthroats and bandits that call themselves students, and killed a few of them. Humph!" he snorted, rising to his feet and pacing back and forth. "Students, me eye! They might fool the American public with their carefully prepared yarns in our press about their demonstrations being all same college boys' pajama parades at home, but they're not fooling anybody else. They know what to expect, now, if they try any more funny stuff, and you can bet they will stay quiet. They're nobody's fools!"

The skipper withdrew his gaze from the open port, and turning slowly, smiled provokingly into the exec's flushed face.

"I'm just as well satisfied with things as they are," he said patiently as though talking to himself, while he carefully filled his pipe. "Americans aren't in wrong, boycotted, or having anything like the troubles that some of the other foreigners are having, and probably won't so long as we stay here. I wouldn't want to be ashore with a landing force under present conditions. Couldn't shoot, even if something serious did happen, without embroiling the United States in the mess, which we mustn't do. Get spanked if we did!"

The exec had nothing to say to this, but the skipper could see that he was not convinced. Puffing on his pipe for a few moments he continued, "Anyway, no use going off half cocked and worrying about something we know nothing about. 'The heathen Chinee is peculiar,' you know, and maybe the admiral knows something about this bunch of bad eggs that is stirring up this ruckus against foreigners, that we don't. I'm not going to offer him any suggestions for the present. He's the boss, so calm yourself, boy, and don't borrow trouble.

"Of course," he added facetiously, "I won't protest any orders to return to our station above the gorges—when they come—so run along, now; I'm busy."

"All right. Guess I'll go topside and get a breath of air," the executive said, a bit stiffly, moving toward the door.

"Wish you luck," the skipper called after him. "Maybe we'll get orders on tonight's radio schedule."

No answer.

"And maybe we won't."

A few minutes later he sat bolt upright, his arms arrested in mid air as though he had come in contact with a high voltage wire. There came the ominous sound of rushing feet on the deck overhead. His heart stood still. Was there a man overboard? Tense, he waited for the cry, his senses coming quickly to the alert at this approach of danger.

"A-wa-a-y, landing force!" the high-pitched voice of the bos'n's mate rattled through the afternoon calm.

"Landing force?" he repeated. "Impossible!"

His feet dropped to the deck. Grabbing his cap and blouse from his bunk, he dashed from his cabin and through the wardroom to the hatchway that led to the quarter-deck, getting into his clothes as he ran. At the foot of the ladder, he ran into the executive officer, who was rushing below.

"Distress signal at the consulate!" the exec gasped. "I called away the landing force." He followed Lieutenant Snyder up the ladder two treads at a time, his short legs striving to keep pace with the skipper's long ones.

Lieutenant Snyder looked anxiously toward the consulate. Sure enough, as the exec had reported, the flag was floating upside down.

"Wh-what in the world—?" he exclaimed, then glanced about the decks. An appreciative smile lighted up his stern features.

The men, who, a few minutes before, had been lying despondently about the decks, chafing at the heat and inactivity, now poured up and down the ladders and hatchways like ants whose home hill had been stirred up. Some squatted on the deck, lacing shoes and leggings; others buckled belts heavy with ammunition about their waists; while from innocent-looking boxes and lockers about the topside, the gunner's mates were breaking out rifles and machine guns with which to equip them. About everyone was a tense seriousness as he hurried through his task. Even the old *El Carlos* seemed to bristle with animation and importance like a live thing, as though remembering the clank of arms of her younger days under the Spanish régime.

TO THE inexperienced eye, the hurry and bustle and running about would have seemed chaotic, but beneath it all was the orderly precision of a well-organized man-o'-war.

"Get 'em equipped and into the boats—I'll take 'em!" the skipper snapped as he shot down the hatch to his cabin for his own equipment.

A quick cloud of disappointment fell over the exec's face. "My luck, of course!" he said as he went forward to hurry the boats to the gangway.

The ship's sampan coolies were the first alongside, with the peculiar characteristic inherent in coolies and tradesmen, Chinese, of allying themselves with the invader, they grinned up at the exec their desire to assist in transporting the armed force ashore, apparently as interested and anxious about their speedy departure as though they, too, belonged to the ship's company. The possibility of their being the indirect cause of the death of some of their fellow-countrymen apparently concerned them not at all. A coolie's meal ticket comes first; his stomach full, he may then ponder such meaningless terms as patriotism and brotherly love, but not otherwise; and the garbage from the *El Carlos* was their gold mine.

"All right, you yalla scoundrels," the exec chuckled, "we'll use you."

If the coolies had had tails, they would have wagged them.

A crisp order or two, the rattle of accouterments, and the ship's motor launch, towing the two sampans laden with grim, sweating men, was soon chugging across the narrow strip of swift current. With the skipper in the lead, they scrambled ashore and onto the dock. Snatching up their arms and extra ammunition, they followed after him at double time up the bund toward the consulate.

"Seven minutes flat! Well, what's the excitement?" panted the skipper in greeting to the consul.

A look of relief spread over the consul's drawn, sallow face as he nervously watched the approach of the small, but well-armed party that followed close on the skipper's heels.

For answer, the consul pointed dramatically upriver. Following his glance, the skipper saw a fleet of human-freighted sampans with red flags and banners waving, stretched across the yellow, mile-wide flood of the Yangtze, headed for the Hankow side.

"Dragon Day Festival," the consul explained. "Big parade of students over there in Wuchang," nodding toward the Chinese town on the opposite side of the river. "The Tupan of the province assured me yesterday, when I called on him at his yamen, that he would not permit a demonstration. Lost control; got scared or something. Anyway—," the consul shrugged his shoulders expressively. "Now," he continued, "they're coming over here to parade. But that's a blind. It will be one of the biggest demonstrations against foreigners that's been pulled off in China." The consul was almost distrait. "God knows what violence they may resort to."

The skipper watched him narrowly. It was plain to be seen that the consul was agitated—unduly alarmed, in fact, the skipper thought—but for the life of him, he could see no reason for taking the thing so seriously.

"Why," he thought, "the United States is the 'white haired boy' out here. Nothing too good for us. These other fellows now—" looking at the idle ships of other nations tied up at the docks, or anchored in midstream because the Chinese would have none of them—"they may have cause for worry. But why us?"

The question would not answer itself. The skipper puzzled on. "Unfortunate for them, yes! And they're probably a bit jealous, too. Us doing a land office business, and them closed up tight, goods on the black list, and being threatened all the time——"

A suspicious thought flitted through the skipper's mind. He tried to cast it aside, but the consul's next words confirmed that suspicion.

"Called a meeting as soon as I heard of it. All the consuls here. Agreed to co-operate and keep them out of the foreign settlements."

The consul met the skipper's perplexed eyes, then glanced quickly away. Then he exploded the bomb.

"We will guard Kung Yiang Road."

The skipper could not have been more suprised had the consul kicked him.

"Kung Yiang Road?" he said. "Wh-why, why—" his eyes wide with unbelief as the seriousness of his position crashed through his mind. "Why that's the only way they could possibly get in without wading through rice swamps! My God, man, what were—" He checked himself before he should say too much, but his eyes did not lose their startled look.

"I'm afraid you let them put one over on you that time, consul, and I'm to hold the sack." His shoulders squared. "And the last order I received was to prevent a clash at all costs!"

The consul looked uncomfortable, but offered no suggestions. His was the diplomatic end.

"And I've got to stop them by moral force," the skipper said with a wry smile as his mind wrestled with this delicate problem.

"Oh, Lord, yes!" the other answered quickly, his eyes straining upriver where the sampans laden with cheering rioters were landing. "Don't shoot any of them, or do anything that would draw the United States into the trouble. Make a show of force; shoot over their heads and scare them back—they scare easily, you know—but, ah, there should be a guard left at the consulate."

The skipper said nothing. He couldn't afford to get into a row with the State Department—but he could not control the angry flash that shot so suddenly from his eyes.

"Oh, by all means, yes," he observed dryly after a moment. "Valuable records and so forth should be preserved." And turning abruptly, walked quickly down to the consulate gate where his men waited.

LEAVING a squad of disappointed men to guard the consulate, the skipper set out for the sector assigned him. Loading the guns and ammunition in rickshas that were loitering close by, they speedily covered the few blocks that intervened, the *pad-pad* of the coolie's feet on the hot pavement keeping time to the hurrying footsteps of the heavier-shod men who trotted rapidly along close behind the skipper.

During that short trip, the skipper's mind had not been idle. He knew the street well. Bounded on both sides by warehouses and go-downs, it was practically a concrete-walled pass, one that lent itself readily to easy defense, if one could use gunfire. Before they had arrived on the scene, he had a plan drawn up.

"Rip out a few sections of that iron fence and build a light barricade across the street down at that end," he ordered crisply the first petty officer that arrived, indicating the fence and location for the barricade with an inclusive sweep of his hand.

"Warner," he called to another petty officer as he divided the winded men into two groups, "take these men, and build the main barricade right here. All the materials you'll need down that side street there," anticipating the question before it was asked. "Work fast now!"

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth before the men were off at a run. Bags of concrete, baskets of gravel, rocks and other materials from the street repair job were rushed to the spot. Even the ricksha coolies were pressed into service, and those who did not agree quickly were unceremoniously thrust aside and a bluejacket took his place between the shafts of the light vehicles.

"They're sure to come," the skipper said to himself as he watched the barricade grow under the hands of the hurrying men. "They've got the news long before this by 'bamboo telegraph.' Damn them, they know we are forbidden to shoot." His heart skipped a beat as he thought of what might happen should the rioters try to force an entrance.

"They wouldn't try it if anybody else was here but us. They'd get a hot reception like they did before, and they know it, but now—" his voice trailed off into silence, but black thoughts thundered in his brain.

A rumble of thunder in the distance brought him out of his reverie, and centered his thoughts on the immediate situation. Night would soon be upon him, and he must finish his preparations before the threatening storm broke. As he encouraged his men, grimy as field hands at harvest time, he could hear faint cries from the direction of the native city.

"We'll be ready for you!" he said. He hitched about his waist his heavy pistol and belt leaden with cartridge clips, and loosed his once natty, white uniform, now soiled and clinging wetly to his body. "But I hope this storm will stop you."

The happy thought was short lived. One of the native staff from the consulate who had been reconnoitering, dashed up, completely out of breath.

"They come this way, chop-chop!" he cried excitedly in his missionary English. "Storm come they think good joss."

The skipper's jaw set hard. His strategy was simple, but it was the best he could do. "If they force this light barricade, then we'll retreat down to the other one." He glanced down the street toward the main barricade where his machine guns were emplaced. "And if the worst comes to the worst, we'll——"

The rain that had been falling gently now came down in solid sheets. Ordering his men to shelter, he glanced apprehensively down the street toward the native city, and followed them.

Flattening himself against the sheer walls of the go-down, he thought bitterly of his restraining instructions.

"Use moral force. Moral force, hell!" he argued with himself. "Here I could stand off an army, and I can't shoot a damned shot!"

The men, crowded along the wall on both sides of him, ceased their cheerful banter about being rewarded with leather medals for their part in this expedition, and turned their eyes toward him.

"Gosh, Captain," one of them who had hunted with him when they were in the southern Philippines, spoke up, "this reminds me of the time we was lampin' deers in Cotobato."

The skipper paid him slight attention, but in spite of the seriousness of the moment, he could not refrain from a grin at the recollection of the incident which might have turned out seriously for them.

"Yes, sir!" continued the man, as he recounted the details for the benefit of a group of his fellows huddled close about him. "It was rainin' cats an' dogs just like it is now, an' me an' the captain stopped in a Moro village to get outa the wet. Had some cans of life buoy carbide along to use in the spot-lamps, an' the cans leaked. Carbide?" he stopped to explain. "Don't you know what that is? Why, that's gray colored stuff about the size of fine coal; throw water on it an' she burns like celluloid. Anyways," he gestured dramatically, "the cans leaked an' blowed up. You'd a thought they was star shells. Man, they was hell t' pay! The shack got on fire an' the women run out screamin' bloody murder an' them Moro boys come a runnin' with bolos an' long, wiggly lookin' corn knives— Scared? We-l-l," he admitted modestly, "I've been scared wuss, but when I seen that them half-naked bozos wanted to argue, I sorta stepped back an' let the captain do the talkin'. Of course," he added firmly, "I was all set to pitch in, in case they got rough."

The derisive guffaws of the men broke the stillness as the bluejacket's narrative was finished.

"Quiet!" the skipper ordered sharply, cocking his ear toward the native city. The sound of yelling and cheering could now be heard distinctly above the patter of the rain on the street. Excited whispers ran along the rows of drenched men huddled against the wall in the darkness. They forgot their discomfort in the anticipation of the action that they had long looked forward to, and grasping their rifles more firmly, they waited for the skipper's orders.

Lieutenant Snyder stood with his face turned toward the skies, seemingly paying no attention to the approaching menace, like a navigator searching for a star on which to fix his position.

"Couldn't I riddle them with machine guns from up there!" he thought, his eyes glancing along the flat roofs of the buildings that lined both sides of the street. "No, damn it all, can't do that. No bloodshed."

The roar of the approaching mob came more clearly to his ears. "I've got to think of something—quick—or there'll damn sure be bloodshed. They certainly are not going to walk over this gang of mine."

His heart beat fast. Pulling his sodden note-book from his pocket, he stepped to the shelter of the wall, and while one of his men held a flashlight, hastily scribbled a few words.

"Take this to the ship and give it to the executive officer," he ordered, thrusting the bit of paper into the hands of the man nearest, "and hurry!"

For the next several minutes he paced nervously up and down in the steadily pouring rain.

"Rain, confound it, rain!" he grumbled. "But keep on raining; maybe you'll save us yet—if you don't drown us or wash the barricade down.

"I knew it!" the skipper cried abruptly, as he saw two men burst from the gloom that marked the end of the street and dash toward him, looking back over their shoulders as they came. Pausing in his stride, he waited for them to come up.

"They're coming!" they reported breathlessly. "Just turned the corner at the edge of the native city. Be here in a minute now."

"Let 'em!" the skipper answered, then turning toward his men ordered, "Take stations!"

The men detailed to the first barricade ran to their positions. Those whose posts were at the main barricade moved reluctantly, looking behind them as they trotted off down the street.

Lieutenant Snyder followed, looking anxiously ahead for the return of the man who had been sent to the ship. It seemed an interminable time since he had left.

"Thank God!" he breathed, as a ricksha came *clop-clopping* toward him, and the messenger jumped out.

"I got it, Captain!" he cried, thrusting into his hands a signal pistol and a half dozen shells, then turning, took a bulky package from the ricksha.

"Fine work!" the skipper commended. "Take that blank ammunition up to the first barricade and tell the men there to stand by for orders. I'll be right up."

Calling his men about him, he hastily outlined his plan of action, and gave them instructions as to the parts they should play in case the worst came to the worst. Then with a final warning that they should not fire until he, personally, gave the order, the skipper hurried up the street to make his first stand against the wild rioters that could now be seen in the blaze of the torch-lights.

HE HAD not long to wait. The mob advanced toward the weak barricade with a roar, their wild voices echoing from wall to wall like those of wild animals in a zoo at feeding time, until, in the dim light of the street lamps, they saw that the way was blocked. The high-pitched cries now dropped to shrill protests as those leading stopped to confer, but only for a few moments. As those behind pressed forward, the whole once more advanced on the position where the handful of determined American bluejackets boldly stood their ground awaiting the attack.

On they came, lustful and forbidding in the faint light, their yellow faces alight with madness and insane fervor, while their leaders with bulging eyes and voices hoarse from much exhortation, urged them to drive the foreign devils forever from their shores.

Ignorant coolies, carried along by curiosity and the promise of loot, swelled the crowd. Disgruntled soldiers, the curse of modern China, still bearing their arms, which they brandished menacingly and discharged in the air at intervals with the abandon of children, formed a large section of the mass. In the forefront were the students, their white gowns now muddy and bedraggled, leading this, the scum of China, against the foreigners. "Kill the foreign devils!" they cried with the fervor of fanaticism.

"College boys' parade!" the skipper remarked grimly as he watched them. "Humph! Wish some of our gentle, 'uplift the heathen' friends at home could be here to see it. They'd holler for a battleship or two, quick!"

He soon saw that the students meant to force the issue. In a low voice, the skipper gave his orders. The defenders at the barricade raised their rifles to their shoulders, and taking aim over the heads of the front ranks of the mob, let go a volley. Telltale bits of paper from the blank cartridges flew through the air and fluttered down like moths.

A murmur of surprise went up from the mob. They had not expected this. They had been assured that there would be no resistance.

But the leaders hesitated not at all. They knew that this was a warning volley, that even the foreign devils must do something to "save face." And sure in their minds that no serious opposition would be given, they came steadily forward, followed closely by the reassured mass of yelling humanity.

Lieutenant Snyder was worried. His strategy was not working out as he had anticipated. His hands clenched as the consul's words, "they scare easily," flashed through his mind.

"They do like hell!" he growled, a cold shiver running through his body. "Suppose they don't bluff?" he unbuttoned his pistol holster, and in a voice that trembled a trifle, ordered his men to aim directly at the front ranks.

Those leading fell back in alarm before the unwavering muzzles now pointing directly at them, forcing those immediately behind to slow up.

"Fire!"

The second volley blazed into the darkness, straight into the faces of the cowering leaders but a few yards away from the barricade.

Covering their faces with their hands, they fought and clawed their way into the midst of the mob, leaving a group of soldiers in front nearest the barricade. Realizing quickly that blank ammunition was being used, since no one was injured, the soldiers sped the word to those following, and with derisive yells, they rushed the barricade which went down with a crash before them.

Lieutenant Snyder, his heart in his mouth, hurriedly fell back with his men, and took refuge behind the main barricade. He had made a mistake in using blank cartridges; it was a dangerous expedient, and he realized it now. His bluff had been called.

As a pack of snarling, cowardly curs becomes emboldened and dashes in to close quarters to deliver slashing snaps, so the mob, seeing the skipper and his men retreat before them, was now ten-fold bolder than before, and advanced unafraid. The skipper had played directly into the leaders' hands. They were sure, now, the Americans back of the barricade were but making a bluff at defense!

Quick to seize this advantage, they again took the lead and screeched jeeringly to their followers:

"See! The foreign devils are afraid! They run like sheep!" pointing toward the barricade. "Death to the foreign devils and their spawn!"

Like a helpless bird before the swaying head of a snake, the skipper stood with fixed gaze on the sea of exultant, yellow faces that rolled toward him like a tidal wave.

"You certainly played hell, you fool!" he cursed himself. "Now you've *got* to shoot!"

Then there sounded in his ears clear and distinct as though the admiral were standing beside him, his final instructions:

"Use moral force! Prevent bloodshed at all hazards!"

"Oh, my God!" he cried in desperation. "If I could only shoot—one volley would be enough. I made a mistake—I should never have run!"

SUDDENLY a new apprehension gripped him. The blood seemed to drain from his body, leaving him weak and nauseated. It was as though the screams of helpless women and children, whose safety was dependent on his decision, had burst on his ears. Murder—and worse!

The thought seared his brain. Never could he permit such a thing so long as he had the power to resist, regardless of the consequences to himself or the country whose uniform he wore.

"To hell with such damnable orders!" he cried.

His mind recoiled from such insubordination after he realized what he had said, and noted that his men standing tense about him were watching him nervously. They realized that the situation was no jesting matter, and worst of all, they saw that their leader was wavering now in indecision.

Turning his eye away, the skipper scanned the dim roofs of the warehouses on either side of the narrow street.

"Uncle Sam," he said, "you're in wrong with China, but by God, it wasn't my fault!"

He turned to his men. "With *live* cartridges—load!"

The men were grim as they jammed the clips into the magazines. The quick working of the bolts, and the cartridges slid home in the chambers in deadly, metallic chorus.

The skipper held his breath. This was

a serious step. His heart beat more quickly. He thought he saw uncertainty in their faces. Would they stop now? But no! They were almost upon him.

"One more attempt at a bluff," he thought, "then——"

Desperately he contemplated the probable result of this delay.

"Fire!" he heard his voice order. The quick crash of the volley from the rifles, and the sputter of the machine gun bursts smote his ears and echoed sharply along the street. The bullets shrieked close over the heads of the mob, whispering sudden death.

Those leading paused, startled and suddenly afraid. Alarm showed in their yellow faces and rolling eyes. Something had gone wrong: the foreign devils were not bluffing this time! Looking into the set, white faces of the skipper and his men, they knew that they were facing the nebulous hereafter.

The skipper's heart gave a bound of hope. They were retreating; the day was saved! But his hopes were short lived. The panic-stricken leaders would gladly have withdrawn, but—it was too late, now. The bloodthirsty mob behind, thinking that this was another bluff with blank ammunition, forced the leaders unwillingly on, straight into the muzzles of the deadly rifles and machine guns.

Screaming with fear, they struggled and fought to overcome the mass that was pushing them on to certain death. It was an unequal fight. As well might a child have pitted its puny strength against an oncoming steam roller.

With bated breath, the skipper watched this ill-balanced struggle. Soon the barricade would be swarming with lust-crazed Mongols who would sweep the few defenders from their positions and go ravaging through the foreign settlements unopposed. It was now or never. Grasping the signal pistol, he pointed it heavenward, and fired.

A streaming red star flared into the night like a rocket from a ship in distress. At the signal, shadowy forms took shape along the roofs of the warehouses, and moved, ghostly, against the sky. Then, like a scourging fire from heaven, showers of sparks rained down into the street from both sides. Growing in size as they came, they turned into flaming pellets that went zipping and sputtering like huge, mad fireflies among the howling mob, giving off a stench that was more nauseating even than the noisome odors from the wet, steaming bodies.

A moment the seething rioters stood aghast. Then a wild scream rent the night: "The breath of the Dragon! The breath of the Dragon!"

The cry was taken up and echoed wildly from mouth to mouth, up and down the street. Some groveled on the wet, sloppy paving, hiding their faces from this awful vengeance. Shrieks of awe and pain burst from others as the flaming sparks stuck to their wet clothing and bodies.

In the surrounding darkness and gloom, the street was a blazing cañon, with fire raining from the skies. The superstitious coolies milled and screamed in an agony of terror and dread like frenzied animals, trampling their fellows underfoot regardless. Forgotten the promise of loot; forgotten the foreign devils whom they were to drive out and destroy; forgotten everything, in fact, save escape from this terrible wrath that the Dragon was breathing upon them.

The skipper watched with glowing eyes. The screams and confusion of the would-be ravagers was music to his ears. His straining muscles trembled in the exultation of the moment. His wild scheme had worked beyond his hopes.

But there was still another danger. A stampede was imminent. Instinctively he acted as the thought flashed through his mind.

"To the charge!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, jumping to the top of the barricade and gesticulating wildly with both arms.

Emptying their rifles over the heads of the mob, the bluejackets streamed from the barricade toward the panic-stricken Orientals as though shot from a catapult. Yelling, they charged with fixed bayonets straight into the seething mass of demonstrators, clubbing to right and left as they tore through.

Before this onslaught, those nearest turned and fled as from the plague, forcing the others along with them. Sounds as of a wholesale murder swelled the night as they fought to get clear of this unexpected menace. Trampling underfoot their leaders and everything that stood in their way, the movement gained headway, and soon the entire mob stampeded back toward the native city as though the Dragon himself was after them.

Recalling his charging men, Lieutenant Snyder, breathless from his exertions but with the light of victory in his eyes, made his way back to the barricade. Up the street toward him rushed a wild piratical crew that he viewed with alarm until coming closer, he recognized them as reinforcements from the ship.

Hatless and puffing like a porpoise, the executive officer armed with a shot-gun, and right on his heels, the engineer force and cooks, armed with fire tools, cutlasses and carving knives, dashed upon the scene, and behind them—in a ricksha—the consul.

"What happened—what happened?" the exec panted, looking about for possible enemies. "I thought you were having a sure 'nuff battle! Where are they?"

"I thought we were too," the skipper answered, pointing down the street toward the native city. "But the men on the roofs with the carbide certainly turned the trick!"

"What? No casualties?" the consul broke in unbelievingly, as he stared down the empty, smoking street. "Did you gas them?"

"Hell, no!" the skipper exploded disrespectfully. "Carbided 'em!"

WONDER DOKTERS of the ZAMBEZI

By E. VAN LIER RIBBINK

CHAPTER I

GOLD OF OPHIR

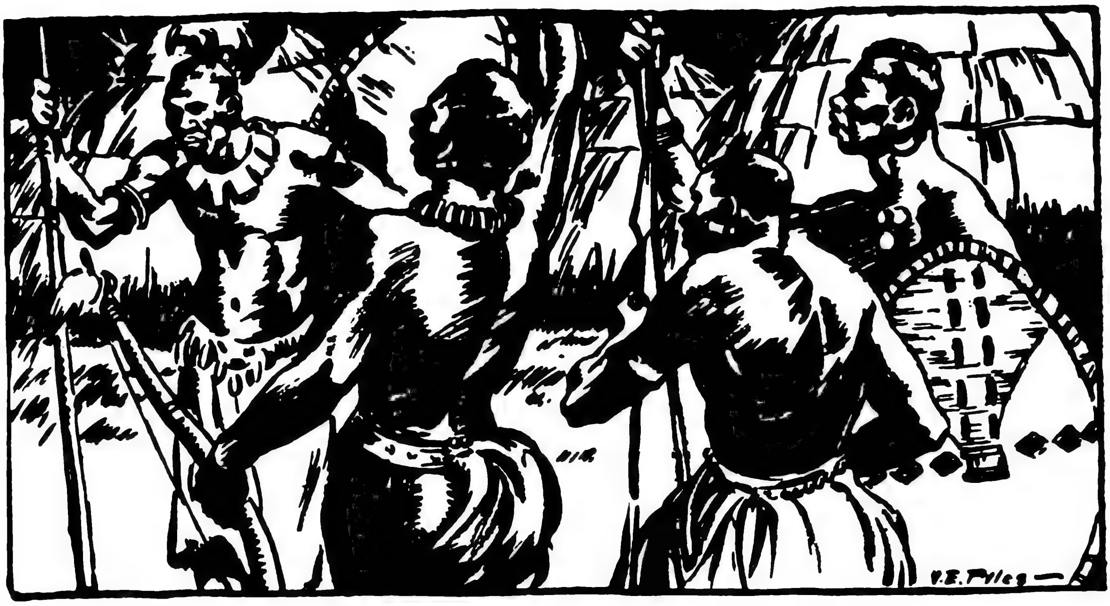
OF COURSE, I had heard the story of the Phenician gold before. That is, in a general way; for it is a matter of common belief in South Africa that Rhodesia is the ancient land of Ophir, whence King Solomon drew the gold for all his glory. But though I expected plenty of adventure when I sailed from Galveston in charge of a boatload of Texas mules consigned to Durban, my liveliest phantasy had not painted the wild-goose chase on which I now found myself embarked.

But—was it a wild-goose chase? I had come up-country, from the coast, to Kimberley, having heard wonders about the diamond fields. Well—frankly, I was disappointed. That dusty, sweltering main street, flanked by low, corrugated-iron buildings, had little about it to suggest the Golconda. Surely, the vale of diamonds of Sinbad the Sailor never looked like this. But then, Sinbad was a notorious old liar!

The heat of the afternoon was keeping most of Kimberley indoors, or on the long, cool veranda of the Diamondfields Club. I was the only white man in sight. Seated with their backs to the raised curbing were some Shangaan Kaffirs, wriggling their bare toes, making *dol ossies*—little images of oxen and other animals—from huge balls of soft, yellow clay, and filling the air with their noisy laughter. Near them, but silent and apart in his racial pride, with a vast contempt for the childish behavior of all other Bantus, sat a huge Zulu, a "ringed man," squatting on a kaross of mangy jackal skins.

I was up against it—strictly. The fare from Port Natal to the city of diamonds had taken almost all my cash, and here I was, one solitary American, the possessor of a beautiful pith helmet, strongly recommended by a Durban outfitter for "wear on the veld." May the Lord forgive him! In Kimberley, the Transvaal and Rhodesia I saw plenty of wide-brimmed felt hats, but not another lid like mine!

The heat was too much for me, Texan though I was. So I hiked back to the one-story, whitewashed hotel, there to sit



Here is a novelette with the thrill and suspense of true adventure: a tale of dark Rhodesia, of tall Zulu warriors, and the sinister, lost treasure of King Solomon

on the veranda and mull over the dismal future. And here Fortune took a hand!

The hotel was a rendezvous for hunters, miners, engineers, ostrich farmers, and particularly for that strange South African breed of men known as transport riders. These are hardy citizens who make a living by driving teams of mules or oxen across the veld, carrying supplies.

Two such were seated near me, smoking strong Magaliesberg in large-bowl pipes—the *dopper pyp* popularized by the late Oom Paul. They were talking of mules, that much I gathered from their curious bilingual speech, a mixture of English and Boer-Dutch, or *taal* words. My cue to butt in on the conversation came when I heard one of the men, the taller of the two, say something about getting hold of "a good man who understands mules."

Said I, "Pardon me, but if you are in need of a mule expert, there's one right here. I have only just given up a job as valet to a boatload of mules all the way from Texas across the Atlantic."

The two Boers eyed me curiously, but they seemed friendly. Then the big man drawled, "My dear chap, we are looking for a common Hottentot mule skinner—not for a white gentleman with such a beautiful helmet."

He smiled good-naturedly as he made this little dig at my headpiece. His companion, a broad-shouldered fellow, rather shorter in stature than the general run of up-country Boers, gravely motioned me to a chair and, without more ado, ordered three whisky sodas. We toasted each other, clinking glasses in the Africander way, and my new acquaintances responded to my American "Here's how!" with their "*Gezondheid!*—Your health!" Then they settled back in their chairs, and looked expectantly at me. So I told my story—the usual one of the tenderfoot who comes to Kimberley with a hazy notion of picking up a diamond or two from the veld. Hearing this, they smiled but looked serious enough when I blurted out:

"Well, after all, diamonds cannot be so scarce around here. A Kaffir came to my room last night, and wanted to sell me a sparkler in the rough."

"Did you buy it?"—the tall man shot this question at me.

"No, I did not, it looked kind of fishy to me," I replied.

"Lucky for you," said the Boer. "That native was a trap, young fellow, employed by De Beer's to test new arrivals on the diamond fields for I. D. B.—otherwise Illicit Diamond Buying. If you had fallen for that little play, you would be in the *tronk* (jail) by now."

Evidently my story had broken the ice, for my new friends now asked whether I really meant to hire out as a mule skinner, or whether I had been spoofing them. I replied that I was in need of a job, whereupon the smaller of the two, whose name was Van Wyk, said:

"Well, you might do worse than come with us. The diamond fields are no place for a white man out of a job. Kimberley is a poor town to go broke in, as many a poor devil knows. After all, barring a few large stores and public buildings, the place is a mere collection of corrugated-iron shanties, dusty streets, bars, Kaffir compounds, and the large hole they dig the diamonds from."

"Right you are," affirmed the tall man, whose name was Morkel. "White men without *mali* and *sebenza* (Zulu for money and work) don't last long in these diggings. There was a man—he is dead now—who landed here with some money. He spent it over the Diamondfields Bar and then borrowed from other whites. Couldn't get a job in town, and knew either too much or too little to turn transport rider. So, at last, he began hanging around in the Kaffir location, shuffling up to the fires where the blacks cooked their mealie-pap. They would give the white boss a hand-out of pap, and sometimes a drink of Kaffir beer; and one day, when I made a shortcut through the *stad* of the blacks, I saw him helping a Xosa woman stir a pot of pap."

"Yes," reminisced Van Wyk, "and then there was old Jerry Wilson, who operated the first telegraph in the Cape. Jerry had gone to pieces, and made his home in a piano case—lined with lead it was!—in someone's back yard. And he was lying dead in his piano case for a couple of days before we found him. And there is that other chap, a former London barrister—also a victim of the diamond fields. Each and every morning you can see him sitting, thoroughly drunk, in the yard back of the resident magistrate's court, the sun beating on his bare head. It's a marvel that he never gets sunstroke! And there he solicits the business of natives who are hauled before the magistrate, on charges of brewing Kaffir beer, smoking *dagga*, or stealing diamonds from the pit. He advises the Kaffirs how they are to plead, his fee being one shilling, just the price of a drink! Yesterday he staggered into the courtroom, but they threw him out—on his back. Yes, yes, Kimberley is a bad place for white gentlemen who have seen better days."

NEEDLESS to say, my new friends by this time had me completely disillusioned with life in the city of diamonds, so I suggested that they drop the Cassandra business, and come to a discussion of the future.

"Well," drawled Van Wyk, "think we may strike a bargain. But can you keep a secret? Man, we are out for adventure—such adventure as you never dreamed of!"

He looked at his companion, and Morkel nodded his head, as if to say: "Go ahead." Aloud he said: "I think the Yankee will do. Tell him."

A short silence, and then Van Wyk began: "Last January, in midsummer, we were in Bulawayo, where we had delivered a load from Fort Tuli. While waiting for a return load of some kind or other, we met a man by the name of Garland, an old Englishman, who had been hunter, prospector, soldier, and even transport rider, as people in South Africa will be. Old Garland seemed to like our company, and sat with us for hours, telling of the good shooting along the lower stretches of the great Zambezi River which forms the northern geographic border of South Africa. Yet, all the time that Garland talked, I had a feeling that he was sizing us up, and I said to Morkel here: 'The old boy is up to something, mark my word.'

"Sure enough, at last he came out with the definite proposition that we accompany him north to the Zambezi River. He was frank on the subject of money and said: 'I go to seek something of great value, and cannot pay you for your time and trouble until I find it. But it's there all right, and after we find it, we'll ll be rich.' Sounds crazy, doesn't it? Yet the old boy was as sane as you and I, and after a while he had both of us going, for I was never so curious before in all my life. But the old man would not tell the details of his plan; he only threw out hints. No, he said, it was not a mine he was after—something better than that. And he claimed to have his information, whatever it might be, from a son of the great Lobengula himself!

"Now, this Lobengula you know, was the last king of the Matabele. These Matabele are a branch of the great Ama-Zulu nation, and they were defeated by Cecil Rhodes and his Chartered Company troops, with the result that Lobengula with a few faithful *impies,* or regiments, was driven from his country which then became known as Rhodesia. The unfortunate king took refuge in the bushveld, near the Zambezi, and here he died soon after—a hunted exile. And it was from the household of the exiled Lobengula himself that Garland claimed to have learned the secret of untold wealth, hidden somewhere on or near the Zambezi. He made it plain, also, that the quest for this treasure would be no easy matter, and that it was surrounded by very real dangers.

"Of course, we were inclined to be rather skeptical. After all, we had only known Garland a few days, and transport-riding was our business, not chasing imaginary pots of gold.

"Our doubting irritated the old man, and at last he asked: 'Did you fellows ever hear how King Lobengula, after his *impies* were beaten by the whites, sent one of his *indunas* to Cecil Rhodes, with a bag of gold, in token of his surrender?'

"Of course, we were familiar with this incident in South African history, and we also knew that the peace envoy of the Matabele king, carrying the ransom of gold, had been intercepted by two of Rhodes' scouts, who promptly bolted with the gold. We also knew that their treason had been responsible for the needless prosecution of the war, resulting in the wiping out of the Matabeles and the death of their king.

"So we told Garland that this was all ancient history to us. His eyes gleamed, and he asked: 'Did you fellows ever stop to consider where King Lobengula, a hunted fugitive in the bosveld, got that bag of gold? By the way—it was unminted, virgin gold at that!'

"Here was a poser. We had never thought of that! So we just sat and stared at Garland, who chuckled and said: 'No, I don't think that side of the story ever struck you! Yes—just where did Lobengula get that gold?'

"Well, the upshot of it was that the three of us pulled out of Bulawayo in a couple of Cape-carts, bound for the Zambezi, but we never got there. First of all, three of our mules which had not been 'salted' or rendered immune, died of tsetse fly bites. Then we all piled into one Cape-cart, and continued our trek. But the next night, only a few miles from the great river, we outspanned in a little open space, and here old Garland volunteered to cut some wood for the fire, and went off into the bush by himself. Suddenly we heard him calling, in a voice of fear and agony. We dashed into the bush and found him hacking with his knife at a wound just below his right knee, and nearby, its hood still extended, was a huge, black *mamba*—the South African cobra—which he had killed with his ax after it had bitten him. We did all we could to save Garland's life, but it was no use. A younger man might have overcome the poison, but Garland was too old and weak. He became delirious and died within an hour. But in his delirium he repeated, again and again: 'The ships of gold—the ships of gold—gold—gold!' We were too horrified to ask what he meant.

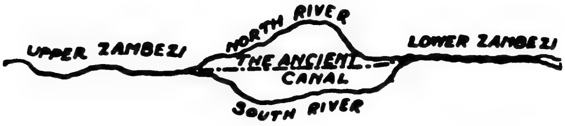
"That night we sat with the dead body behind our campfire, rifles in hand, for all the lions in Matabeleland had scented our mules, and made the night hideous with their roaring. The next morning, as soon as day broke, we buried poor old Garland, heaping stones on the grave to keep off the jackals. And then we turned right back to Bulawayo."

The Boer's narrative had held me spellbound up to its gruesome climax, and I was not prepared for this sudden ending.

"What," I asked, "you returned to Bulawayo—was that the end of your adventure?"

Van Wyk smiled, shaking his head.

"No," he said, "it is only the start. For this is what we found hidden in the dead man's tobacco pouch." And he drew from his pocket a sheet of paper, on which was neatly drawn this map or diagram:



"That," said Van Wyk, "is a map of part of the Zambezi River, east of the Victoria Falls, toward the sea. Most of this country has been explored in a more or less haphazard way by hunters and others; but the part marked 'North River, Ancient Canal and South River' is still terra incognita, and forms part of the great morass through which the Zambezi wanders for many miles, in numerous channels, before again converging into one stream on its way to the Indian Ocean.

"Yes," interrupted Morkel, putting his finger on the map, "and here it is we must look for whatever Garland meant when he spoke of his 'ships of gold.' Incidentally, several years ago I heard an old Matabele *induna* tell that Lobengula and his followers fled to these marshes when they were pressed hard by the whites. So, you see, the scent is getting warm. This map, Lobengula's last hiding place, and the bag of gold he sent to Rhodes—it all dovetails nicely."

Needless to say I was by now as excited as a boy to whom they have just told his first pirate story. Would I go with my new friends to the Zambezi to find the mysterious treasure! The two Boers told me frankly that they needed one other man—myself—to join their party, and that I suited them because I was a foreigner and therefore could not "blab to friends and relatives" as Morkel put it. But why did they need a third man, I asked.

"Because," said Van Wyk, "we will probably have to fight our way through. From some vague remarks Garland made the day before he died, we believe that the treasure, whatever it may turn out to be, is guarded by a little-known tribe of Moeras Kaffirs. We don't think for a moment that all we have to do is march in and lift the treasure. And it is only fair to warn you that you may never see Texas again. You are in for some rough trekking if you come with us, old chap."

Well—did you ever see a Lone Star man turn his back on a thrill? Two days later the three of us were aboard the Victoria Falls Limited, bound for Rhodesia. I felt no regrets on seeing Kimberley disappear in the dust and the heat of another stifling day, and congratulated myself, as the train sped past the tin shanties of the Kaffir location, and the gigantic compound in which the Kaffir diamond diggers are housed, on having met my new friends.

We did not mix with the other passengers on the train, and my companions proved agreeable, though taciturn, as they smoked one pipe of Magaliesberg after another in the compartment, or walked up and down the platforms of the small zinc-and-iron stations during the long waits incidental to the subcontinental railway service. I noticed that they were averse to talking with other Boers and Colonials, and that they particularly shunned the company of the natty civil servants, whose ubiquitous presence was advertised by the well-known Oxford drawl. This isolation of our little party, of course, was due to a desire to keep our expedition a secret.

CHAPTER II

INTO THE BOSVELD

AT LAST we arrived at our destination. Outside the station we found our transport, two high-wheeled Cape-carts, each drawn by two mules. A middle aged Hottentot was in charge of the carts.

"Hello Jan, you old brandy thief, do you still drink *kaapse dop?*" was Van Wyk's greeting. The "boy" grinned and gratefully pocketed a twist of tobacco which Van Wyk handed him.

Then he asked: *"Wanneer wil die baas trek?"*—When does the boss desire to leave?

"Right away, as soon as we load our things in the carts. Are your mules rested?"

The Hottentot answered that the transport had arrived two days ago, and that the mules were in fine fettle. Each of the mules was *gezouten* against sickness, he said.

We mounted the tall carts by placing our feet on the spokes of the huge wheels—we three whites occupying the first cart

Morkel and Van Wyk took turns at driving. They told me that handling a span of mules in a Cape-cart was quite an art, and one in which they would instruct me as soon as we reached more open country. The second cart was driven by Jan, who had with him as a helper a Basuto Kaffir, who turned out to be a good and reliable worker. For the rest, both carts were piled high with our goods, tents, ammunition, rifles, and the like.

From the start, taking a northeasterly direction, we made good time. When we outspanned that night near a small *doorn boom* grove, we had covered some sixty miles of sparsely populated country. Once we passed through a sand storm, that bane of the African veld, which covered us completely with red dust, and when we stopped to eat were attacked by tiny *zandvliege* in swarms—a type of gnat half the size of an ordinary house fly, which entered our mouths with every bite we took; but the remainder of the day and night passed without incident. Early the next morning, after a breakfast of hard Boer *beschuit* dipped in coffee, we were off again. The country had now lost its characteristic high veld appearance, and I noted all sorts of queer growths and excrescences. I was particularly struck with the curious ant-hills, some only a few feet high and rounded at the top, and others that rose from a broad base and then tapered toward the top to a height of ten feet or more, for all the world like ornamental spires.

"Good stuff, that, for tennis courts and roads," Van Wyk remarked, pointing to some of these ant-heaps, consisting of reddish earth. "But never try sitting on one of those *miere hope*, young fellow! I once drove a transport for a government man, an expert of the Transvaal department of agriculture, who had just come out from England to tell us Boers how to run a South African ranch. While I was fixing camp this Englishman, a pleasant little fellow, wandered away for a quiet smoke. Seating himself on one of those ant-hills, he commenced to enjoy the scenery. Soon I heard him shout at the top of his voice, and there he came, sprinting along the banks of the Komati River. As he dashed by, I saw that he was completely covered with soldier-ants. The next moment the Englishman had splashed into the river to get rid of his tormentors. However, we fished him out before the crocs had a chance to get at him."

As we bowled along, I noticed that we had left the wagon road and were now following one of the many Kaffir *paadjes* marked out across the veld by natives trudging in single file from one kraal to another. Soon the kraals and the few mealie patches also disappeared. We stopped at the last kraal just long enough to get a drink of Kaffir beer which, by the way, did not taste at all bad, though it was heady stuff. At this kraal I also got my first close-up view of South African native life, and was impressed with the fact that the women seemed to do all the work, such as hoeing the mealie fields, while they carried their babies slung on their backs in blankets. Their husbands, in the meantime, were stretched at full length in the shade of the beehive huts, taking life with a philosophic ease.

It was a few miles beyond this kraal that the road passed a depression in the earth, which, on closer inspection, proved to be a shaft dug by human hands. When I expressed surprise that there should have been any attempt at mining at this distance from the settlements, Morkel said:

"This shaft, and many others like it in these parts, was not made by either Boers or English. They were found by the first of the pioneers and are undoubtedly the work of that mysterious race which penetrated South Africa in the twilight of history—in all probability, so the professors say, the ancient Phenicians. You remember that the Bible tells how Hiram, King of Tyre, sent his men to Ophir for the gold of King Solomon's Temple? Well, we believe that this country right here is the ancient Ophir. There are many other signs of Phenician penetration in Rhodesia."

HAVING given our mules a brief rest, we now pushed on into country that became more and more jungly. The bushveld was much denser, and Morkel declared that we were now entering a district "where there were more lions than men." As if to prove this we ran full tilt into a lion family that evening, just before we outspanned. The beasts—a lion and his mate—had killed a blesbok doe, and were busy devouring their prey when we arrived within two hundred yards of the scene. A clump of trees had hidden them from view, and the lions were directly in our path.

As soon as our mules sighted or winded the animals they tried to swerve into the bush, and the cart driven by Jan was almost overturned by his panicky span. Meanwhile the lions stood growling over the dead bok, evidently determined not to give way. There was nothing for it but to give battle. From behind us Jan and the Basuto were shouting: "The lions, boss! Shoot."

Our three rifles spoke at almost the same time. Evidently the two Boers had aimed at the male lion, which toppled over on the spot, but the lioness at which I had aimed made a flying leap which brought it within a few feet of our mules before we brought her down, and even then it took another shot to finish her. Our two servants now skinned the dead lions, suspending the pelts from a tall tree to dry.

"If the ants don't get them, we'll take these skins with us when we return," Morkel said.

The country here was full of game—springbok, blesbok, eland, duiker, impala, and what not. Just before sunset I was lucky enough to pick a fine impala buck out of a herd which dashed into the bush at our approach. These impala are probably the fastest and most graceful of all South African antelopes. They are roan-color and travel in large herds. Morkel told me that frequently several thousand head are counted in one herd, and that they color the bush red.

So we had roasted impala for dinner that night, and just before turning in, sat down to smoke. Darkness on the veld is of the pitch black kind, and this makes the starry South African night, with the Southern Cross overhead, all the more glorious. Our boys had crawled into their blankets—and were fast asleep. As we were in lion country we had a large fire going, our mules being made secure in the space between the fire and the carts. Between the wheels of the carts, the careful Morkel had arranged a crude barrier of thorn branches.

I was in the act of knocking the ashes from my pipe, ready to go to sleep, when I saw that my two companions had seized their rifles and were listening intently. After a while, they went down on hands and knees, and commenced crawling from the glare of the campfire into the dark, motioning me to follow. For a few minutes we remained like this, flat in the dust, and holding our breath, and then I heard the sound which the two Boers evidently had heard sometime previous—the hoofbeats of a horse over stony ground. Even to my unpractised ear it was evident that the animal was almost spent, and was blundering forward, urged by its unseen rider. A few seconds more, and a vague shape loomed in the darkness.

Morkel sprang to his feet, hand on trigger. He challenged the newcomer: "Who goes there?"

Then came the surprising response, in English: "A servant of the Lord."

"Advance," Morkel ordered, his rifle covering the man.

There advanced into the firelight, in our bushveld camp, far from civilization, a white man, and judging from his black coat and hat, a minister at that!

"The fellow is a missionary!" Van Wyk exclaimed irreverently. "I'll be dashed! Here, hold on, old-timer." For our nocturnal visitor had stumbled forward, collapsing in a faint.

"Brandy," Morkel ordered Jan, who was awake by this time. Placing his arm around the shoulders of the semiconscious man, the tall Boer poured the brandy down his throat.

The man tried to struggle to his feet, appearing dazed and mumbling words we could not catch. After a little while he seemed to come to, and sat blinking his eyes in the firelight.

"Your arm is bleeding. Here, let me bind it for you. Tell us what has happened," Van Wyk said.

"An assagai stab. Oh, those devils!" the man muttered, again sinking into a lethargy. His head fell forward on his chest and, before we could further question him, he fell into the sleep of utter exhaustion. We made him as comfortable as possible, and then turned in ourselves.

THE next day the missionary—for such he was indeed—told us his story, one of the many tragedies of the veld.

Word had come to him, it appeared, of a mysterious tribe that lived somewhere on the lower reaches of the Zambezi. This tribe, which called itself Amalonga, was, he said, ruled by a powerful priesthood of *matagati*—native magicians or *"wonder dokters,"* as the Boers quaintly call them. Herrington, for such was the missionary's name, had been successful in his work among the Swazies, Basutos, and other native tribes. He had conceived the plan to go among the Amalonga to try conclusions with their *matagati*, and break the hold of these *wonder dokters* over their dupes. Spurred on to yet greater zeal by the tales of a human sacrifice practised by the Amalonga, and known as the "Feast-of-the-Great-Smoke," he communicated his plans to his wife and nineteen year old daughter who had in the past accompanied him to Thaba 'Nchu and other mission stations, and they had bravely, though foolishly, decided to go with him into the wilds of the Zambezi. Arriving at a point close to the great river their native guides and porters had refused to proceed further as they feared the Amalonga. Thereupon Herrington and the two women had plunged into the jungle alone, the women driving a cart and the missionary on horseback.

After many hardships they had come to the country of the Amalonga. Herrington described the people of this tribe as being closer in general appearance and customs to the Swahilis of the East Coast of Africa than to the Bantu tribes. He added that they wore garments resembling those of the Arabs, in contrast to the moocha and kaross of the Zulu and Matabele.

Continuing, the missionary related how he had endeavored to preach to the Amalonga and to tell them of the customs and beliefs of the white men. But, by order of the *matagati* he had not been permitted to approach the banks of the Zambezi or to settle in the *stad* of the Amalonga. Evidently trouble was brewing, and he had already made plans to return, when the little party was suddenly attacked by a band of warriors who assagaied the women in their open Cape-cart. Herrington would have shared their fate, but his horse, being slightly wounded by an assagai, had rushed from the mêlée into the veld, carrying the missionary, who was wounded himself, out of danger. Knowing that his wife and daughter were killed in the hail of assagais, and realizing the futility of any single-handed attempt on his part, Herrington gave the horse its head, and had reached our camp after an all day and night ride.

The missionary's story demonstrated that there was no likelihood of our effecting a peaceful entry among the Amalonga. Instead, it was plain, we would find the same sharp assagais whetted for us that had brought death to Herrington's wife and daughter. So we held a council of war, taking Herrington into our confidence.

Thanks to a good night's rest, food, and his fortunate meeting with us, the missionary had undergone a complete transformation. He was no longer the dazed, shaken creature of the night before, and instead of being a meek clergyman, he now showed himself the incarnate fury of vengeance. He said that nothing would suit him better than to accompany us, and asked us for a rifle and a few rounds of ammunition. His horse, which was completely lame and wounded, we had to shoot in mercy, Herrington taking a seat in the second Cape-cart.

Thus reinforced, our little expedition again trekked forward at break of day, observing the greatest caution. According to what Herrington told us, we would come, after another day's trek, to the marshy lands which mark the approach to the Zambezi at this point, and there we might hope to proceed unseen for many miles in the tall reeds, though of necessity our progress would be slow in the marshes.

As yet, however, we were still traversing a rather stony stretch of territory. After a couple of hours a low range of kopjes became visible on the horizon, and Herrington told us that the swamp lands, and the Zambezi River lay beyond. We got in among the kopjes late that afternoon, and here Herrington counseled us to move slowly and to be on our guard for possible Amalonga scouts.

My nerves, by now, were at a high tension, I admit. My forebears had been Indian fighters on the American plains, my father had fought at Alamo, and I experienced what may have been an atavistic thrill at the thought of battle with African savages. Thus I felt a tingling of the nerves when, as we bumped over the boulders of a narrow ravine—for road there was none—Morkel suddenly pulled the reins tight, bringing the Cape-cart to a stop. As Jan's cart drew up alongside, Morkel silently pointed to a hillside about a third of a mile away, which was in deep shadow, the sun already having set behind it. There, slowly and laboriously climbing the steep grade, was a band of men! We grasped our rifles, and Van Wyk said, under his breath: "Jove! There they are."

The tension lasted a minute or so, but it snapped in a most unexpected manner when our Hottentot driver began laughing and cackling at the top of his voice.

"Shut up, you yellow belly!" Morkel exclaimed furiously, snatching the long whip of hippo leather and threatening the Hottentot.

"This is too funny," the boy cried, nearly tumbling from the cart in that excess of mirth to which South African natives are so prone.

"What is funny, you yellow fool?" the big Boer demanded furiously.

Jan gave another cackle, which however changed to a startled yelp as the lash of the exasperated white man's whip suddenly fell on his shoulders. He skipped from the cart, and yelled, hiding behind the wheel: "Those are not human beings. Those are baboons."

With a smothered curse the big Dutchman dropped the whip and drew from his pocket a pair of field-glasses which he leveled at the mountainside. Then, laughing almost as loudly as the Hottentot, he handed me the glasses.

Sure enough, as I swept the hillside, the "enemy" turned out to be, not the plumed and leopardskin-clad warriors of the Amalonga we had feared to see, but a large band of those almost human simians of South Africa—the big brown baboons! We had been badly taken in by the habit of these great apes of climbing mountains by walking on their hind legs only. This they do, for all the world, like human beings, the only difference being that the baboons propel themselves from time to time by the aid of their long and hairy forearms. The dark shadows covering the mountainside had still further helped to create the illusion that we were dealing with a band of native warriors marching in single file.

"Well," Van Wyk exclaimed ruefully, "I did not think that old hands like Morkel and I would fall for this kind of thing. That's all right for greenhorns like that bunch of yeomanry during the Boer War."

FOR my benefit Van Wyk elucidated as we drove on again, how a regiment of brave but overzealous volunteers, largely composed of town-bred clerks, shopkeepers, professional men and regular cockneys, had, on coming out to South Africa during the Boer War, opened a terrific fire on a far-off hill position that appeared to be literally swarming with Boers. They had found out their error when one of Kitchener's staff officers galloped up to demand what in hell they meant by wasting good ammunition on a mountainside full of inoffensive brown baboons!

We had by now got quite close to the apes, and I noticed that they moved forward like soldiers, led by a large male who selected the easier grades with almost human deliberation. The baboons were not a bit worried by our approach, the females only evincing some concern as they grabbed their young and drew them along in much the same way in which human parents propel a child that lingers by the wayside. As we came up with them the leader of the apes calmly gave us the once over and remarked something that sounded like *"ugh, ugh,"* whereupon the entire company stopped in their tracks, evidently inviting us to go ahead.

I thought it interesting to see what the reaction of these intelligent apes would be to a threat, and aimed my rifle at them, having no intention to shoot, however.

"Here, drop it," growled Morkel, seizing my rifle and turning it away.

Crestfallen and rather irritated I rejoined that I had not planned to shoot, whereupon the Boer became apologetic, saying:

"I once did see a man shoot a baboon and I'll never forget it! It was almost as bad as shooting a human being, for a baboon that has been hurt carries on like a helpless child. A wounded baboon seems to have but a single thought—to remove the thing that is causing the pain. So the poor thing pokes its paws in the wound and tries to draw out the bullet—and you may imagine the rest."

"Yes," corroborated Van Wyk, "if Dan

win had come to our beloved *Suid Afrika,* he would have found his missing links gamboling about on every kopje. These *baviane* sure are human. Why, our natives swear that baboons adopt children that are lost on the veld, and it is not so long ago that a Cape government sent an expedition to check up on reports that beings resembling humans, were traveling in the Drakensberg with a band of *baviane.* The native legends are full of this sort of thing."

Though night had now fallen over kopje and veld we thought it wise to continue our trek, so as to get out of the mountains and into the tall river reeds without being observed by any prowling Amalonga. However, this night travel proved heartbreaking work for ourselves, as well as for our mules. Owing to the intense darkness we could only guess where we were going, and Morkel afterwards said that he had practically given the mules their head, trusting that their instinct would show them a way through the enormous rocks and boulders. And while we were thus jolting along, we had the uneasy feeling that any one of these many rocks might shelter a band of Amalonga warriors, and that we should be assagaied without being able to even put up a fight for our lives.

But, at last, the grade was downward instead of up, the path—such as it was—appeared smoother, and at daybreak we found ourselves on the opposite slope of the mountains we had climbed during the night. It was not, as yet, entirely light, but Herrington called to us from the second cart, and pointed northeast. And there, far off, and still vague, with the miasma rising all about it, we had our first glimpse of the mighty Zambezi, South Africa's greatest stream. And, furthermore, we could just make out that, at one point, the river seemed to split into three branches, each running, some ten miles apart, in an easterly direction.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Morkel. "We must have hit the exact spot shown on Garland's map! See that straight line in the center? I'll bet that is the canal."

There seemed little doubt but that he was right. We could clearly see that the two outer rivers, as I will call them, were of irregular contour, but the course in the center seemed to be straight as a rod, and might well enough be the work of man.

This supposition was confirmed by Herrington, whose cart had pulled up beside ours. He remarked, "That channel you see there was dug by the same ancient people who penetrated into central South Africa to look for gold. To the best of my knowledge it has never been explored by white men, but the story of its existence has become legendary among the tribes of Mozambique and the East Coast in general. In fact, at Beira I ran across a Zanzibari (one of those slavers that caused Stanley so much trouble) who told me that in Biblical days large fleets of Phenician biremes hugged the coast of East Africa to the mouth of the Zambezi, and entered the river. This Zanzibari also claimed that, in order to bring their vessels into the gold-yielding interior of what is now Rhodesia, the Phenicians had been compelled at one point to canalize the river in order to eliminate its cataracts and rapids."

"Well, and what is your deduction, Reverend," Van Wyk asked.

"I believe indeed that we are here face to face with one of the great engineering works of that Hiram, King of Tyre, who brought such great treasure to Solomon," the missionary replied. "Of course, proof positive we have not, but it may well be that we shall find it before we are through with our enterprise."

To Morkel, Van Wyk and myself, all this was welcome confirmation of our own belief. We felt that we were indeed near the source of Lobengula's mysterious gold supply, and that we might soon solve the secret of the "ships of gold" of which poor old Garland had raved in his delirium.

But the practical Morkel soon brought us back to earth, saying: "That's all very interesting and historic, but our first concern is how we are going to get there without our friends the Amalonga letting daylight into us with their assagais! We must hurry down this slope before it is light altogether. And we have got to find shelter in those reeds below. If the Amalonga spot us here, we are lost."

So we scrambled down the rocks, at imminent risk of losing the wheels of the Cape-carts and breaking the legs of our poor mules. But, though we made all possible speed, the sun already stood high in the heavens when we at last entered the land of reeds. And here we found that it was impossible to move our carts, owing to the fact that the wheels sank to the hubs in the soggy ground, which had been recently submerged by the floods of the great river. Moreover, the growth of reeds was so dense in many places that we had to give up all hope of driving through them in our Cape-carts. There remained only one thing to do: we must leave the carts behind, load our munitions and the supplies most needed on the mules, and make our way through the swamp on foot, leading the animals. We therefore looked around for a convenient spot in which to leave the carts, and, as luck would have it, found, close to the swamp, a sort of natural lean-to formed by two rocks supporting a huge boulder. Here we stored the carts, as well as those belongings we could not load on the mules, hoping they would escape observation by whatever natives might come this way.

CHAPTER III

THE ZULU WARRIOR

AND now there commenced the most horrible journey it ever was my ill fortune to take. Within the screen of reeds the heat was simply terrific. Also the smell of decaying matter was often overpowering. There was not a breath of air and no shade worth mentioning. Furthermore we had to proceed with the greatest caution, feeling our way step by step, for in spots the ground was so soggy that progress in any given direction became almost impossible. And to yet further increase our difficulties, we were every few yards or so confronted with large pools in the midst of the reeds, and there we had to be particularly careful, as the reeds stood as thick in these pools as on the marshy land, and it was hard to tell one from the other.

By noon we were exhausted and, finding a comparatively dry spot at the edge of a pool, flung ourselves on the ground, wringing wet and panting. I had taken off every bit of superfluous clothing and, attracted by the cool appearance of the water amidst the tall reeds, it occurred to me that I might take a dip. I stripped and was about to let myself slide into the inviting depth of the water when our Hottentot servant happened to roll over on his side, and looked at me. Instantly jumping to his feet, he yelled:

"Don't, boss! Look out for crocodiles."

Startled, I stepped back, and had barely done so when a huge shape shot from a dense thicket of reeds in the center of the pool. As I ran back, an immense head lifted above the surface, jaws wide open, and then the crocodile perceiving that I had retreated from the banks of the pool, came to a sudden stop, turned itself half about, and lifting a tremendous spiked tail above the surface, literally swept the bank within a yard of the spot where I was standing. So ferocious was its onslaught that the reptile's sharp tail mowed down a clump of reeds as clean as if the job had been done with a scythe. The beast immediately followed up its attack, for, balked of its prey in the first rush, it now began to climb the low bank of the pool.

As Van Wyk afterwards remarked, the croc must have been famished, for as a rule they do not pursue their prey on the land. By this time I had joined my companions and was groping for my rifle. Morkel, who never lost his head, ordered Ja to hand him the box of explosive bullets.

Turning again, I saw the monster waddling toward us, its jaws wide open. I fired—rather at random. The croc kept on coming. Then I saw that Morkel and Van Wyk had thrown themselves flat o the ground and were calmly taking ai at the crocodile's eyes. Meantime ou two servants were hanging onto the ropes of the mules, which were rearing an plunging and trying to run off into th reeds. By now, the croc was hardly te yards off, and yet neither of the two Boe had fired. An awful stench came fro the beast, and in desperation I fired agai only to hear the click of my bullet, as i glanced off the armored hide. I no seemed almost to feel the fetid breath the beast—and at last the rifles of bot South Africans spoke. The advance the crocodile stopped like that of a spe torpedo. The great jaws clamped up an down just twice, the immense tail threshe the reeds, and there lay the huge sauria its massive head shattered from the for of the explosive bullets my companio had sent crashing through its eyes in the brain.

"Good work," Morkel said, getting to his feet, and brushing his clothes. "I told Van Wyk to aim at the left eye and I took the right. The eyes are the only place in which to hit a croc and explosive bullets help a lot you know."

Van Wyk looked at me and burst out laughing, as he asked: "And so you were going to put one over on your pals by taking a nice little swim all by yourself, eh? *Allemachtig*, you never know what these tenderfeet will do the next! Here, let me show you how to take a bath in the crocodile country."

Calling our servants he said we would take an *emmer bad*, whereupon the boys produced a small zinc bucket, which they fastened to a good-sized rope. Taking good care not to approach too close to the pool, they lowered the bucket and, drawing it up, poured the water again and again over us. My companions then told me that this *emmer bad*, or bucket bath, was the recognized manner in which white men performed their ablutions in swampy country.

We were now glad to resume our march and to leave the carcass of the croc which had already attracted an army of swamp flies and crawling things of all kinds.

We dragged ourselves along wearily, for the going became more and more beset with difficulties. Frequently we had to stop and sound out our path because the reeds were now so dense that it often became impossible to say where the land ended and the water commenced.

AND now it was that I began to suspect that we were not alone in this horrible land of reeds, but that we were being followed. It happened that I dropped my bowie knife, which I had carried for many years, and I went back by myself, part of the way, hoping to find it. Now, as I have said, there was not a breath of air, not the slightest passage of wind, in these densely packed reeds. Yet, when I unexpectedly allowed my companions to go on ahead, and doubled back on our tracks, I distinctly saw the reeds, through which we had just passed, sway back and forth, as if something or someone was hastily retreating and trying to keep out of sight. I confess the thing gave me a creepy sensation, but I hid behind some reeds and closely watched the spot. Nothing showed, however, and after a few minutes I heard my companions calling me, so I decided to rejoin them.

Taking Morkel and Van Wyk aside, I told them my suspicions. They listened carefully, and Morkel said: "We are probably being tracked by only one or two scouts—a larger party could not move so quietly in these reeds. The three of us will fall behind and try to ambush them. In the meantime we will let Herrington, the boys and the mules move on."

He told the missionary of the plan, and presently, reaching another dense clump of reeds, we slipped quietly in among them, lying down at full length.

A few minutes passed, and not a sound was heard. The stamping of our mules had died away, and the heat in the thicket was such that I felt an overpowering desire to close my eyes and sleep. I had just turned to Morkel to say that possibly I had been mistaken, when I saw him lean forward and grasp his rifle. I followed the direction of his eyes. The reeds were swaying again! And the next moment a man had stepped quietly into the small open space directly opposite us. He was a magnificent Zulu—a ringed fighting man—that much I saw at first glance. He was of a great stature and carried himself with that proud grace for which his nation is noted. The great Zulu *skerm*, or shield, was slung over his left arm, and he carried in his right hand two assagais—one short and one long—and a huge knobkerrie. A splendid kaross of leopard and silver jackal skins rested on his shoulders. So silent and sudden had been his appearance that there was an eerie sense of unreality about the thing.

The Zulu advanced noiselessly, reading the spoor made by our expedition. At the exact point where we had slipped into the thicket, he came to a stop. For a few seconds the Zulu remained motionless, still reading the spoor; then he looked straight at the spot where we were lying, invisible to him. And then came our humiliating surprise for, lifting his shield in salute, the Zulu said loudly and sonorously: "*Sacha bona, Inkoos!*"—Greetings, oh chief!

Speak of your anticlimaxes! Here we had planned a perfect ambush, sweating in those confounded reeds and baking under a torrid sun—and then a courtly Zulu steps out of the bush, wishing us polite greetings. To say that we felt humiliated, would be putting it mildly. So somewhat shamefacedly, we got to our feet, and approached the Zulu, who never moved, but stood there quietly, the points of his assagais pointed downward in token of his peaceful intentions.

Morkel now addressed him in Zulu, and received a reply in the same language. As the Zulu spoke, Van Wyk interpreted for my benefit.

"You followed us," Morkel said.

"I did, *Inkoos*."

"Why?"

"To find out who you are, where you are going, and to join and help you. For if you are going into the Land of the Great Smoke, as I think you are, you will need the strong shield and the powerful assagai arm of another warrior."

"Who are you?"

"I am called Sikonyela in the tongue of the Matabele and the Ama-Zulu."

"But this is not the country of the Ama-Zulu and the Matabele. How shall we know you, therefore, as a friend and fellow warrior, and not as a spy of the Amalonga, for this is their country?"

The tall man laughed. *"Inkoos,* I am a man. I am not like those dogs of the Amalonga — they who go dressed in woman's clothes and wear long hair."

Rather rudely, I thought, Morkel turned his back on the Zulu, saying: "We had better join our party before we question him any further. There is something mighty strange about all this, but the man unquestionably is a Zulu, and no Amalonga. We will march him along with us and cross-examine him later."

He ordered the Zulu to walk ahead of us, having first relieved him of his assagais, to which the man offered no objection. We soon caught up with our advance guard, where, needless to say, the appearance of our captive greatly amazed Herrington and the two natives.

IT WAS now almost night and, screened by the reeds, we judged it safe to make a small fire. The Zulu had seated himself on his kaross, and took no notice whatsoever of our two servants, for your true son of the Ama-Zulu—"Ama" meaning "people"—has nothing but contempt for all the other Bantus and as for the Hottentots, he calls them the *aasvogels*—vultures—that were created to fetch and carry for both white men and Zulus.

After our rather inadequate meal of *biltong,* or dried game meat, black coffee and *beskuit,* of which our captive also sparingly partook, Morkel ordered the Zulu to give an account of himself and of his presence on the heels of our expedition. The tall fellow rose, and spoke:

"Inkoosies, I am Sikonyela. I come of the blood of Chaka, of the household of Cetewayo. Many years ago there was a great war among the kraals of the Ama-Zulu, brother battling against brother. For Cetewayo and Umbulazo, sons of fat Panda, the king, were two young bulls that could not live in the same kraal. So it befell that Umbulazo was slain by Cetewayo, and his followers driven from the land. My father, Umfalimanzo, had been the head *induna* of Umbulazo, and when the wrath of Cetewayo fell upon his head, he fled with my mother and myself, a child in arms. We trekked by night, and lay hidden by day, fearing the *impies* that Cetewayo had sent after us. At last we reached the great river, and here, in the land of the tall watergrasses, the Men-That-Pray-to-the-Smoke found us and killed my father Umfalimanzo. But my mother and myself they carried into their country as slaves. So I grew to manhood among these Amalonga, whose language I also speak, but my mother taught me the Ama-Zulu tongue of my fathers, and Zulu I have remained.

"I was yet a young man when my mother died, and twice I endeavored to flee, fearing the *matagati,* the *wonder dokters.* But I failed, and was punished by the *matagati,* who told me that should I again make an effort to escape, they would put me to the assagai. So I remained a slave of the Amalonga.

"Then, two nights ago, a young white woman was carried into the great temple of the *matagati.* She was wounded, but will live, and I heard the *matagati* plan, at the next moon, to kill this *inkoosiezana* as a sacrifice to the Gods-of-the-Great-Smoke. They also plan to kill six others in the great smoke, and I learned that Sikonyela, of the blood of Chaka, was to be of that number. So I knew that the time had come to escape or die, and last night I crawled past the Amalonga guards into this land of the high watergrasses.

Your party, *Inkoosies,* makes as much noise on its march as a herd of impala, and it was small wonder that I heard and followed you. Such is my story, oh white men!"

While the Zulu was speaking, Herrington had been sitting by himself, brooding, as was his wont, over the loss of his wife and daughter. Amazed beyond words at Sikonyela's tale, and what it implied, Morkel, Van Wyk and I looked at each other. The Zulu had spoken of a young white woman, who had been carried wounded into the temple, of the Amalonga *wonder dokters.* There could be no doubt about it—Herrington's daughter was alive, a prisoner and an intended sacrifice of the Amalonga priesthood!

Morkel rose, and went over to the missionary. He took him by the arm, placed a hand on his shoulder, and spoke. The Boer had hardly uttered a few words when the missionary rushed up to Sikonyela, and let loose a volley of questions in Zulu. Sikonyela nodded his head, and Herrington turned to us, his face transfigured.

"She is alive" he said, speaking in a curious, breathless way. "The sacrifice is set for tomorrow night, so we are not yet too late."

He evidently never questioned our willingness to aid him in attempting a rescue, nor did we offer any objection.

With all his excitement, the missionary was as level-headed as any of us in the council of war that followed. Sikonyela said that the girl was held in the large temple of the Amalonga priests, which occupied a site on a sort of rocky eminence overlooking the river. He also gave us an inkling of the manner in which the *matagati* duped their followers. From what he said, it appeared that Sikonyela, as a slave in the temple, had discovered that the Great Smoke which played such an important part in the Amalonga ritual, issued from a series of clefts in the rocks on which the temple was built. Evidently, though the Zulu was not aware of the natural causes of the phenomenon, the *matagati* availed themselves of a volcanic condition, the smoke being created by a subterranean fire or possibly by hidden sulphurous waters. The principal vent for the great volume of smoke thus emanating from the bowels of the earth had, judging from the description of the Zulu, been crudely capped by the priests, and was operated at will by them whenever they desired to impress the people with their magic, particularly on sacrificial occasions.

WE ASKED Sikonyela whether it would be feasible for our little party, well equipped with modern weapons, to attack the temple and effect a rescue. He shook his head and replied that the Amalonga were fairly well armed with old-fashioned elephant guns, and with other weapons acquired, from time to time, from adventurous Arabs in exchange for tusks, skins, and the like. Also, he said, a small detachment of Portuguese soldiers from Mozambique and Beira, which had attempted to penetrate into the Amalonga country some years ago, had been ambushed and their rifles captured. Although these firearms only constituted a small part of the Amalonga equipment, he said, they were also well provided with the long *stoot,* or stab-assagai, as well as with assagais for throwing, with which they were adepts.

It was plain, therefore, that nothing was to be gained in open attack, so we inquired whether it would be possible to elude the vigilance of the guards, and force our way in at night. This Sikonyela declared equally impossible.

Thus, it seemed, there was no way out of the delemma. The *matagati* would be free to perform their horrible rites, while we white men were forced to lie hidden in the reeds, helpless, within rifle shot of the temple. This thought must have communicated itself to Herrington, for the missionary suddenly rose to his feet, and walked over to his rifle.

"What are you going to do?" Morkel asked.

"I am going to play a lone hand in this game," the missionary replied, his face the color of wax. "There's no other way out. I cannot lead you men any further into this, but I can at least die with my child."

"Sit down," Morkel abruptly ordered. "There must be a way. Think again, Sikonyela! Thou knowest, those of the blood of Chaka were ever crafty in counsel, like the jackal, and brave in war, like Simba the lion."

"There is indeed a way, *Inkoos,*" the Zulu admitted. "Yet it will lead you through fire and the gates of death, and only the *matagati* of the Amalonga may pass, for they know the way and the evil spirits that guard it."

Sensing our amazement, the Zulu, a born dramatist, like all his tribe, paused for effect. Then he continued:

"From this spot it is but a short trek to the *vlei* where the tall rivergrasses grow no more. Then commences the higher ground which is full of rocks, and here grow trees. One of these trees, a great *untombe,* may only be approached by the *matagati,* it being forbidden to all other Amalonga on pain of death. But, one day, when I was a little *umfaan* I discovered the secret of the *untombe* tree by accident. It occurred like this: Before sunrise the men of the Amalonga had gone to hunt the small oribi buck. On these hunts we helped the men to head off the oribi, and drive them toward the hunters. So it chanced that, while it was yet dark, I got in amongst a large herd of the oribi, and in my excitement, followed, not seeing where I was going. At last, just as the sun rose beyond the great river, I found myself under the wide-spread branches of a tall tree. It was the sacred *untombe!* Frightened, for I knew that I stood in the shade of death itself, I crawled for shelter around the broad stem of the tree, and there found, between a huge rock and the tree, a cave that opened into the earth. Into this I crawled, and had scarcely hidden behind one of the many boulders in the mouth of the cave, when the *bwana matagati* (head priest) himself entered, and walked past my hiding place.

"Keeping well out of sight, I followed him a little way but became frightened at the clouds of smoke that filled the place, and this made me turn back, for the cave seemed to me a place of evil spirits. I knew that if the *matagati* discovered me in or near this spot, they would put me to the assagai, or that I would be hurled into the Great Smoke. So I remained hidden in the entrance of this tunnel all day, and crawled back to the temple as soon as darkness came. And there I saw the head priest, sitting in the circle of his *matagati!* As he had certainly not returned the way I did, I reasoned that he had passed through the smoke and fire of the cave into the temple. This happened many years ago, but if you, *Inkoosies,* will enter the way of death, I shall lead you."

CHAPTER IV

IN THE CAVE OF THE GREAT SMOKE

AN ENTIRELY different aspect had been placed on the enterprise by Sikonyela's story, and, indeed, it appeared to offer the only solution. So we did not argue the matter any further, and it was decided that the two Boers, Herrington, I, and Jan, the Hottentot, would, with Sikonyela as guide, enter the tunnel or cave as soon as night had fallen. Our other boy, the Basuto, was to remain hidden somewhere among the reeds, with our mules and other belongings, and was to be prepared for immediate flight in case our plans miscarried.

It was also agreed that we would remain in our present camp until just before sunset, when we were to resume our march. Thus, Sikonyela said, we would reach the outer edge of the swamp just as night fell. We therefore set to work cleaning our rifles and pistols, filling the bandoleers, and stowing away in our pockets a sufficiency of *biltong* and hard Boer *beskuit* to last us the next twenty-four hours or so.

"After that length of time," Morkel remarked, "we will either be sitting down to an Amalonga banquet, or will never be hungry again."

He had an unpleasant way of predicting trouble, Morkel had.

As the hour drew near for our departure, I happened to pull out my gold watch. The instrument seemed to fascinate Sikonyela. As I held it to his ear, so that he could hear it ticking, the Zulu asked: "What is the little round thing that talks incessantly like a woman?" Your true Zulu has the lordliest contempt for womankind. I tried to explain the working of a watch to him, and then the Zulu said something that made the two Boers and myself jump as if we had been shot.

"The little-round-thing-that-talks-like-a-woman is made of the same yellow stuff that the *matagati* made us dig out of the ships in the sand," he said, fingering the watch.

The three of us spoke at once—in fact we voiced our curiosity in a manner that must have appeared most unseemly to the dignified, reserved Zulu. At least, he looked at us in amazement, shrugged his shoulders, and said that this was not the time for idle talk, that we had to start on our trek, and that he would tell us about the "yellow stuff" later—if we were still alive!

The sun had now sunk so low as to be almost hidden by the tall reeds, and we set off at as fast a pace as the swampy ground allowed. Sikonyela led the way, we four whites followed immediately behind him, our rifles ready for any emergency, and our two natives with the mules brought up the rear. We had not proceeded very far when Sikonyela came to a stop, and held up his hand in warning. For the moment we could not see any cause for alarm, but then we heard a great crashing in the reeds, not a hundred yards ahead of us. Sikonyela whispered that some large animal was evidently passing through the swamp and cautioned us to shoot only in case of urgent necessity, for fear that the sound of the shot would be heard by the Amalonga.

The commotion in the reeds had by now reached a spot not more than twenty yards from us, and then suddenly, in a little clearing, the cause of the disturbance came into sight—an immense snake, and a python at that, fully twenty feet in length. I heard Van Wyk gasp his favorite *"Allemachtig!"* as the immense body rapidly passed through the clearing. And then we heard a great splashing to our right, indicating that the monster had taken to the water of the nearest pool.

We were on the point of continuing our journey, when pandemonium broke loose in the pool, the water of which was evidently being violently agitated, even to the extent of splashing over the reeds and wetting us. Then we heard a noise that had the effect of a roar and a bellowing both, and saw the tall reeds toppling over in all directions.

"By Jove, that snake has got hold of a leopard or a lion, or something!" Morkel exclaimed. "It must be a battle worth seeing. I am going to have a look."

He dashed through the reeds, Van Wyk and I following. And there we beheld a sight that, I am sure, few if any white men ever witnessed before. There, in the shallow water of the pool, a titanic battle was being waged between the great snake that had crossed our path and a huge crocodile. The python had wound coil after coil around the spiked body of the saurian, and was endeavoring to crush its foe through exercise of the enormous pressure these reptiles are capable of developing. But the big snake had misjudged its distance and, instead of gripping the crocodile around the middle or near the head, it had wound its coils around the lower part of its antagonist's body, close to the tail. This had given the crocodile a chance to swing its massive head around, and to get a death grip with its immense jaws on the heavy, thick coils of the snake. The battle had now resolved itself into an endurance contest, depending on whether the snake could crush the crocodile before the latter bit through the python's coils.

As it was, the crocodile must have had the better chance as it slashed away with its enormous jaws at the soft, unprotected flesh of the python, for suddenly the thick coils relaxed their pressure and slid off the body of the crocodile. We then saw that the immense snake had been literally bitten into halves by the crocodile! It was evident, however, that the croc had not come off scotfree either, and that it had probably been badly crushed in the terrific vise of its antagonist, for the beast never stopped to devour the remains of the python, but silently sank back into the depth of the pool.

"Whew!" said Van Wyk. "That was some fight, as our Yankee friend here would say. Well, young man, feel like trying another swim in any of these pools?"

I admitted that I had been cured of any desire to do so, but expressed surprise that the big pythons evidently disputed these pools as a place of residence with the crocodiles. Morkel hereupon told me that the pythons of these regions are of amphibious habits and often spend many hours lying submerged in the shallow, sun-heated waters.

WE NOW noticed that the reeds were thinning out, and that the ground had become drier and more solid to the foot. Also various bushes, plants and even some trees intermingled with the reeds, and soon the growth of the latter stopped altogether. I never was so glad to see the last of any kind of vegetation as when I turned my back on the reeds, those horrible outgrowths of that pestilential swamp.

We had now come to a spot where a clump of large *treur wilge*, a variety of weeping willow, grew close together, and our Zulu guide now called a halt, saying that the Basuto boy and the mules would remain here while we made our way across the intervening open space to the *untombe* tree and the underground passage that connected with the temple of the *matagati.*

Night had fallen and a cool breeze came over the plateau from the direction of the great river. Peace reigned, and we could faintly hear the roar of the lower river as it rushed over the cataracts. It was hard to realize that we were within hail of the habitations of one of the most mysterious and militant tribes of inner Africa, dominated by a powerful priesthood.

Led by Sikonyela, we marched forward in the pitch-black night, avoiding the big stones and the towering ant-hills. At last a tall, dark shape loomed ahead of us, and Sikonyela whispered, "The *untombe.*" It was indeed the sacred tree of the Amalonga, a magnificent specimen found only in the subcontinent of Africa. Still following our guide, we slipped in between the tree and a big rock, and then found ourselves in such utter darkness that further progress seemed impossible. We were in the mouth of the cave, or tunnel. I heard a whispered "*Inkoos,* hold this," and a length of ox-leather rope such as is used on the veld for every conceivable purpose was passed into my hand. Tugging at it I found that it was similarly held by my companions and that it was a simple method devised by Sikonyela to keep our party together in the dark. Thus guided, we made better headway than I had anticipated, but it proved a gruesome trip. Not once, but at least a dozen times, did I feel some sort of reptile—snakes I would have sworn—crawl out almost under foot, and once I saw right ahead of us two small, phosphorescent pin-points of eyes that can only have belonged to another member of the reptile family. The marvel of it was that no harm befell us, blind and helpless as we were in the utter darkness.

For some time we appeared to be descending rather steeply and then became aware of a decided change of temperature. The cave had widened out, and to our left was a continuous hissing sound, as of escaping steam. Also the air had become very humid and stifling, conclusive evidence that we were now in that part of the passageway where Sikonyela had noticed the smoke on the occasion of his memorable trip when he had been almost surprised by the head priest. Although we did not carry torches the Zulu seemed to have no trouble in orientating himself. This, we afterwards discovered, was due to the fact that the Amalonga priests had cleared some sort of path by rolling the boulders to one side, and this prevented our going off the track.

After we had stumbled along for an hour or so, the trail commenced to climb again, and now our hardships increased. The road was blocked by big rocks, often six feet or more high, and the cave had narrowed into a mere shaft. Here we at last came to a stop, and Sikonyela whispered to Morkel to make a light. A short piece of sheep-fat candle, as made by the Boers of the back country, was all we had with us, and this Morkel lit, and carefully sheltered the flame in the hollow of his hand. Though it only threw a fitful light for a few feet, this candle helped us to climb the obstacles in our way. As I have said, the cave had by now become a narrow chimney, and through this we crawled and wriggled, pulling ourselves from one rock to another, being hard put to hold on to our rifles in the meantime. The heat was intense and the humidity or steam which was forced into this narrow shaft, was of such density that we could hardly breathe. Furthermore we were wet to the skin, and my hands and face were covered with scratches.

I could not help thinking how helpless we would be in this position, almost unable to move hand or foot in this narrow corridor of rock, in case Sikonyela had played us false, and the Amalonga should pounce on us from above or below. But at last the shaft suddenly opened into a wide space, and as Morkel held up his light we found ourselves in a small natural chamber of rock. The next instant Sikonyela seized Morkel's arm and whispered to us, as he extinguished the light, to make no sound or movement. For, beyond the wall of rock, we now distinctly heard human voices.

We maintained complete silence and strained our ears to listen, but the men on the other side of the wall of rock were speaking in a tongue that was utterly different from any of the Bantu dialects. Our Zulu guide now crawled along the wall, listening intently. After a few minutes he turned to us, and whispered, "The *matagati* are holding a council. They are speaking of what they will do to Sikonyela, of the blood of Chaka, after their young warriors find him. So be it. We shall see whether these vultures can match their cunning against that of the leopard that hides in the *bos* and strikes while his foes sleep."

Sikonyela now again applied his ear to the wall to listen to the deliberations of the Amalonga magicians. Then he said, "They now speak of the sacrifice. They will kill the white *inkoosiezana* as an offering to the Gods-of-the-Great-Smoke. It is to be before tonight's sun sets. *Inkoosies,* we must strike with the velocity of the tree snake as it darts from the branch at the head of the wayfarer, and yet we must remain invisible as the tsetse that kills our horses."

"That is all very well, Sikonyela," Morkel said, interrupting the Zulu's flowery speech. "But, in the first place: How do we get out of this place into the temple? And then: How do we save the white *inkoosiezana* without being killed ourselves?"

In reply, the Zulu merely lifted his hand, pointing toward a corner of the vault. We now noticed what we had failed to observe before—a faint glimmer of light in the dome of the rock chamber. Here, it appeared, was another chimney tapering off to a higher stratum of the cave. The next thing we noted, and which confirmed Sikonyela's observation, was a long *riem* of rough hippo-leather dangling from this shaft, along the wall. Evidently it was used by the *matagati* for purposes of both ascent and descent whenever they made their way through the underground passage.

Sikonyela was the first to grasp the rope. Planting his toes into the crevices of the rock he drew himself up until his head and shoulders became hidden in the narrow opening. After he had entirely disappeared from view the rest of our party followed. This second chimney proved only to be a few yards in length, and after negotiating it we found ourselves in a large square room, with a floor of dried *koemest,* or cow-dung, such as is customary in the houses of the Basutos, those master builders among the Bantu tribes, and, for that matter, in many Boer farmhouses as well.

AS LUCK would have it, there were no Amalonga warriors or priests in the room which, judging from the large quantity of assagais, shields and knobkerries of every description, all heaped up in one corner, was used by the *matagati* as a storeroom or armory.

To this heap of savage armament Sikonyela led the way, instructing us to hide behind it while he went out to reconnoiter. This, he said, was one of the apartments of the temple in which he had never been permitted to enter, though he knew all the other regions of it thoroughly. The Zulu thereupon parted from us, cautioning us to make no noise or outcry, whatever happened. The next moment he was gone, disappearing noiselessly through a narrow, low aperture that served as a doorway.

And now commenced a period of waiting that seemed interminable. The room was hot as an oven, and to this was added the sickening stench of rawhide that emanated from the heaped-up, hippo-leather shields. Evidently these were newly made shields, the leather for which had been but recently taken from the backs of the giant hippopotami that inhabit the waters of the Zambezi River.

As the hours dragged by slowly in the semidarkness of this sweltering, filthy room, we suffered from a burning thirst. During the passage of the cave we had emptied our calabash gourds, and, owing to the difficulty of finding our way in the darkness, had omitted to fill them again from the rushing waters which we could hear distinctly. Our spunky little Hottentot, Jan, offered to return to the cave and fill the gourds, but this we would not allow. Our suffering was intensified because of the salt *biltong* and dry *biskuit* we had eaten.

As time wore on, we began to fear that Sikonyela had either been captured by the Amalonga and "quietly knocked on the head," as Morkel sardonically opined, or that he had turned traitor and had gone to make his peace with the *matagati* by offering to hand us over as a welcome addition to the great sacrifice. I am sorry to say that, for a while, this seemed to me the most likely possibility.

Morkel, however, scorned the thought, saying, "I know the Zulus. Sikonyela will play fair. A Shangaan or a Xosa will turn traitor fast enough, but as a rule you may rely on a Zulu's word."

At last—it must have been around the noon hour, fully six hours after he had left us—the tall Zulu reentered the room as quietly as he had left. He slid behind the pile of shields and, in a whispering council of war that ensued, told us a story of courage and guile such as I had never heard before.

He related how, after he left us, he found himself in a long corridor which evidently led to the main council hall of the temple. As he was cautiously feeling his way, the Zulu noticed that the main corridor, along which he was traveling, had several branches. Down one of these side corridors, he presently saw two priests coming toward him. This meant that his retreat was cut off, and consequently he had no choice but to go forward. The corridor now made a sudden curve, and, before he could turn back, Sikonyela found himself in a large circular hall—the council room of the *matagati*. Here were seated, on karosses spread on the floor, a large number of the *matagati*, presided over by the head priest himself. Not knowing whether he had already been observed, and fearing that, if he should turn back, he would run into the priests he had seen in the side corridor, Sikonyela did some fast thinking, the result being that he walked boldly into the council room, into the center of the circle of astonished warriors and priests, who, but a few minutes before, had been discussing the means of his capture. So surprised were the Amalonga at the sudden appearance of their quarry that no one attempted to interfere with Sikonyela, as pretending to be in the last stages of exhaustion and suffering, he stumbled toward the head priest, begging for "Water, water!"

Evidently as curious as the others, the *bwana matagati* had ordered one of the lesser priests to hand the Zulu a gourd filled with water. This Sikonyela, who was really extremely thirsty like all of us, had managed to drain at one gulp, giving a very good imitation of a man dying of thirst. The head priest had, subsequently, cross-examined him severely as to where he had been for the past three days, and again Sikonyela had showed himself more than a match in guile for the wily old magician.

He had, while acting his part as one dying of thirst and privation, concocted a clever cock-and-bull story of how he had fallen into one of the many deep, loathsome pits in the recesses of the temple—holes used for the disposal of bones and offal of all kinds, how he was rendered unconscious by the fall and, being weak and delirious from the hurt to his head, had been unable to call out for help. At last, he told them, he had gained sufficient strength to climb out of the pit, whereupon he had made his way, stumbling and groping, into the council hall of the temple.

As accidents of this kind had happened before in the huge temple with its many dark corners and corridors, the Zulu's story had gone over well enough. A tinge of veracity was further lent to his recital by the many scratches on his body, which he had suffered in climbing the steep chimney, as well as by the mud that caked his arms and legs. So he had been ordered to stand aside while the *matagati* consulted among themselves, and had been subsequently permitted to go his way. But they had ordered him to remain in the temple and to report to the head priest that same evening. Evidently, Sikonyela said, the *matagati's* plans for his execution still held good, though they did not suspect that their intended victim was aware of his doom.

AFTER the Zulu had told his story there was a moment of silence, and then the missionary asked if the Zulu had seen his daughter, and in which part of the temple she was imprisoned.

Sikonyela replied that she was imprisoned in one of the rooms beyond the council hall and that, although she was only guarded by two Amalonga women, we would have to pass through two or three apartments filled with *matagati* and warriors, in order to reach her. This, he pointed out, made any immediate attempt at rescue extremely hazardous. "Then what are we to do?" Van Wyk asked.

The Zulu answered, "*Inkoosies*, I have thought this over, and there is a way in which we can send the fear of death among these Amalonga dogs. It is this: When comes the hour before sunset, and with it the time for the sacrifice I, Sikonyela, shall go to the *bwana matagati*, as ordered by him. I shall not take my assagais, and the Amalonga will seize me, and place me on the rock of sacrifice, with the *inkoosiezana*. But beneath my loin-cloth will I hide this." He pointed to the six-shooter that stuck in my belt. "Then, when the time comes that the *bwana matagati* through his magic—which is no magic at all, *inkoosies*—brings forth clouds of smoke from the earth as a sign by his false gods for the killing of the *inkoosiezana* and of Sikonyela, son of the blood of Chaka—then, *Inkoosies*, will I kill that Amalonga dog with this little 'bird-of-death' which is the true and strong medicine of the white men, against which that of the Amalonga has no power. Thus the chief *matagati* of the Amalonga will be killed before the eyes of those that believe him strong and powerful, the fear of that which they do not understand will smite them and, as they cry and run about, we shall seize the *inkoosiezana* and save her and ourselves."

The plan, outlined by the Zulu, seemed in its very audacity our only chance of success, and we unanimously agreed to adopt and carry it through.

Morkel now turned to Sikonyela, saying, "There is one other matter, Sikonyela. We have come a long way to find the stuff of which this is made." He held up my gold watch, which he had borrowed for the purpose, and which had so greatly interested Sikonyela while we were still in the land of the reeds.

The Zulu eyed the watch impatiently, for he could not understand the childish anxiety of the white men to lay their hands on the "yellow stuff" of which the watch was made. He answered, rather abruptly:

"Yes, *Inkoos*, and I told you that the shining stuff, of which this thing-that-talks-so-incessantly-like-a-woman is made, lies hidden in two large canoes in the old, old water. Well, so be it. If we live to see the day and conquer the Amalonga, I shall lead you there, and you shall have your fill of this yellow stuff which, it seems to me, is good for nothing since it is even too soft for assagai points. But now I go to fill our calabashes, for we must lie in wait still longer, and your throats must be parched."

After we had quenched our thirst Sikonyela gave us final instructions, saying that the temple would be deserted, as every living soul would be gone to watch the ceremony of the sacrifice. Thus we would easily pass through the temple, whence, he said, a hollow or sunken road led to the sacrificial Rock-of-the-Great-Smoke. Thereafter, all we had to do was to follow and attack when the time came. With that, the Zulu left us to perform his perilous part in our mission.

CHAPTER V

THE ATTACK

I HARDLY think that we will be accused of cowardice when I say that the two Boers and I would, at that moment, have given almost anything to be back again on the veranda of the Kimberley hotel where we had embarked on this desperate expedition. Here we were, a mere handful of men, on the point of attacking one of the most powerful tribes of South Africa, ruled by a vindictive priesthood. And, although we were practically within gunshot of the mysterious "ships of gold," it was improbable that we would live to handle any of the treasure.

Morkel echoed my own feelings when he said, "It strikes me that six inches of Amalonga assagai will be all we are going to get out of this. Sorry, Yankee, old boy, to have let you in for this. But you know, we gave you fair warning."

Of course, I told my Boer friends not to worry on my account, whereupon, little Van Wyk slapped me on the back, saying, "That's all right, old man, never say die. We'll lick them yet. Boers and Americans make a tough combination for these niggers to go up against."

Here the plucky little fellow, whose good humor never failed in the face of hardship and disaster, began humming the brave words of the old Transvaal *volkslied*—national anthem—the *"Volk Vol Heldenmoed"* which I shall translate here, for it demonstrates the caliber of these South African Dutch whose forebears trekked into the wilderness with their elephant guns and their covered wagons, and whose story reads like that of our own pioneers of the Far West:

"Hast thou heard of that hero band,
Yet so long enslaved?
Sacrificed have they home and hearth,
For sweet Freedom's sake.
Raise on high your country's flag,

Oh, Freemen of Transvaal!
And praise in the glory of our bravest
The sufferings of our Past."

Somehow or other the little man's boldness inspired us all with the feeling that we might yet carry the day. In fact we had quite a time with Herrington, the missionary, who, shortly after Sikonyela left us to report to the head priest, wanted to follow and attack right away, in his tragic eagerness to save his daughter. The man's eyes burned with an insane fire, and at last Morkel had to place his heavy hand on the missionary's shoulder, saying, "Now look you, Mister Missionary, I am the boss here, and you will do as I say. After the fighting is over we will all come to your church, and there you are the boss. But fighting is my trade, and praying yours."

This admonition, rough and ready as it was, had the desired effect, although, until Morkel finally gave the order to march, Herrington sulked by himself like another Achilles in his tent.

We left the evil-smelling room about half an hour after Sikonyela. Not a sound was to be heard in the vast temple as we hugged the walls which, I now noticed, were built of large, flat stones, placed in symmetric order on top of each other. So well laid were these stones that they had remained in place without the aid of mortar, and at this I wondered much, hardly believing that such a huge structure could possibly be the work of savages. Indeed, it was likely a relic of the Phenician adventurers.

Following the long corridor, and ever watchful for a possible ambush, we came to the circular council hall described by the Zulu. It was completely deserted. As we crossed the hall I noticed a huge flat stone on which were engraved the figures of the zodiac, triangles, and other cabalistic signs, all suggestive of the culture of the ancients. I failed to see how these signs could possibly have anything in common with the barbaric customs and rites of the Amalonga and I remember remarking as much to Morkel.

We now entered another and much wider corridor. A great number of doors gave on this passage. These doors probably led to the cubicles of the priests for, looking into one of the small apartments, I saw that they contained some elongated niches in the walls, one above the other, much like berths aboard ships.

As we proceeded, the semidarkness of the temple began to change into an amber-colored light. And then, suddenly, another turn of the corridor showed us the great doorway, and the light of day beyond.

At the same time, however, we saw something that brought us to a complete stop. A tall figure, dressed in long, white garments, was standing guard in the doorway, with its back to us, and a huge spear in its hand. The *matagati* had posted a guard at the entrance to the temple.

"Now we are in for it!" Van Wyk whispered.

"We must rush him before he can give the alarm," Morkel said under his breath. "Steady men, and quiet, it's our only chance. And mind you—no shooting! If he turns and shows fight—cold steel!"

Keeping as close to the wall as possible, we now crept toward the unsuspecting warrior. But Herrington, in his anxiety to get into action and save his daughter, soon outstripped us all. The man was actually running on tiptoe, but fortunately made no noise. Yet the guard must have heard something, for at the last moment he turned his head.

If human face ever registered amazement blended with superstitious fear, it was that Amalonga's. The man seemed frozen where he stood. Then, before he could move or lift his assagai, the fighting clergyman was upon him with a leap that brought them both to earth, rolling over and over.

Morkel and I now also mixed in this rough-and-tumble, and again I had occasion to marvel at the sang-froid and rapid decision of my Boer friend. In less time than it takes to tell, he had divested himself of his coat and wrapped it tight around the head of the Amalonga sentry. This stratagem succeeded only just in time, for the man let out a bellow that was fortunately smothered in the voluminous coat, otherwise it would certainly have brought the entire tribe buzzing around our ears.

While we four white men literally sat on the captive, who still struggled desperately, we despatched Jan to look for some hippo thongs. Then, after trussing him up neatly, and stuffing his mouth with whatever we could spare out of our none too plentiful wardrobe, we carried him back into the passage, well out of sight of friend and foe. There we left him, rolling his eyes, to meditate upon the strange beings, men or gods, that had mysteriously arisen from the depths to lay him low.

"Glad we did not have to kill him," panted Morkel. "We may yet have to cultivate the good will of these people. It would never do to start in with killing an innocent sentry."

THE hollow road of which the Zulu had spoken, stretched before us, and we entered it on the run, our rifles at ready. It took us but a few seconds to traverse it, and then we burst out on a sort of plateau where we beheld one of the weirdest sights ever witnessed by white men.

Imagine a vast plateau of rock, and far beyond this, almost paralleling one another, three immense watercourses, shimmering like ribbons of silver under the African sun. One side of this vast amphitheatre, that closest to us, was raised, which gave it the appearance of a gigantic stage, and here arose three immense pillars of smoke, breaking from fissures in the rock. These columns rose to a great height in the still, tropical air, forming all sorts of grotesque shapes whenever they were disturbed by a gust of wind, and I could well understand why the *matagati* were able to endow this phenomenon of nature with a supernatural interpretation that went over big with the superstitious Amalonga.

In the center of the triangle formed by these three pillars of smoke stood a huge, black rock, and on this rock, their white burnooses showing clear in the dazzling light of the sun, a group of men. Facing this impromptu stage, and seated row after row on the bare rock, was a vast assemblage of men, women and children—the entire tribe of the Amalonga.

As we emerged from the hollow road, there arose from the group on the rock, a sustained chanting, that mingled with the roar of the escaping smoke gasses, creating an eerie discord.

It needed but a glance to show that we had come in the nick of time. For on the raised platform, or rock, two huge *matagati*, naked to the waist, evidently the executioners of the priests, were dragging a woman, whose long hair and white skin proclaimed her to be of our own race, toward the deep fissure from which rose the tallest column of smoke. The woman was struggling desperately, but step by step she was carried closer and closer to the cauldron.

"Those devils are going to throw her into that smoking pit!" yelled Van Wyk. He raised his rifle to shoot, but at that instant was thrust aside violently by Herrington who sped by us, with a bound like that of a leopard, screaming at the top of his voice, and brandishing his rifle.

We followed, and what then happened seems like a dream. There was a commotion in the ranks of the priests, then came the crack of a revolver, and one of the *matagati*, a tall, elderly man, evidently the head priest, fell forward on his face. Two more shots, and Sikonyela, his part of the program carried out, came running toward us.

Of what happened then I have but a confused memory, for I found myself fighting for my life, breast to breast, with a burly *matagati*, who was stabbing me with the biggest assagai I ever saw. My antagonist was well over six feet; he had thrown off his burnoose and had the face of a devil—or so it seemed to my excited fancy. He was driving at me in the most savagely determined way, and, as I had already emptied the magazine of my rifle, I had my hands full in warding off his attack until I was able to bring my revolver into play. Even then it took two shots from the trusty old gun, which I had brought all the way from Texas, to finish him. I had hardly rid myself of this antagonist, when another rushed me from behind, and would have driven his assagai home, had it not been for Van Wyk who, in the parlance of the hunt, gave him both barrels at a yard's distance.

I had just noticed that Herrington and his daughter had now joined us, when the horde of priests broke and ran. Taking up their voluminous skirts, which gave them a rather ludicrous appearance of femininity, they ran for their lives toward the amazed spectators, who had remained spellbound throughout the brief and bloody skirmish. Panic now also seized the men, women and children of the tribe;

our sudden appearance from the very bowels of the earth, as it were; our ferocious onslaught just as the sacrifice was about to take place; the dramatic death of the *bwana matagati* and several of his priests—all these events proved too much for these superstitious, though brave, people. Howling and yelling, firmly convinced that the evil spirits had come out upon them from the pillars of smoke, they fled, streaming back toward the river and the tilled lands. We were masters of the field.

"Quick, back to the temple," ordered Morkel. "They will counterattack as soon as they regain their senses."

We dashed back to the temple, and had almost reached the entrance, when Morkel happened to look over his shoulder, and stopped. Then he called to me: "The missionary is down. Come along."

We ran back, and there was Herrington, lying in a pool of blood, his head in his daughter's lap. The girl was leaning over him, grief stricken and calling his name over and again. We saw at a glance that he was dead, struck between the shoulders by an assagai.

With the aid of our companions, who had now joined us, we lifted the body, and carried it into the temple. Then we turned our thoughts to the matter of defense.

"Here, give us a hand, Yankee," called Van Wyk who, with Morkel and Jan was busy rolling large rocks into the open entrance of the temple. "They are sure to come after us, and we'll need a barricade the worst way."

In looking back, I always think of this as the moment when I first conceived for Helen Herrington that admiration which was soon to change into a different sentiment and to alter the course of both our lives. For this beautiful, plucky girl did not give way to her grief, but, still weeping, came and helped us build the barricade. Her courage even impressed Jan the Hottentot, who mumbled, "The young lady is very plucky." This, Van Wyk remarked to me in an undertone, was indeed, "Praise from Sir Hubert, à la Hottentot."

AT LAST the barricade was built, and we felt somewhat safer. Sikonyela, who had been gone a little while, now returned with two gourds of *maas*, or sour milk, prepared in the Zulu fashion, a bundle of *imfe*, or native-grow sugar cane, a huge, slightly charred leg o mutton, an earthenware pot full of mealie pap, and a calabash of Kaffir beer. He ha found this food and drink somewhere i the recesses of the temple, and you ca take my word for it that it tasted better t us than the most elaborate six course banquet.

"Well, here's a nice mess," said Morke glumly, between bites of the mutton h was carving with his hunting knife. "Her we are in possession of the temple of thes people, for which we have no more us than the devil has for holy water. Moreover, we have killed their priests, have interfered with their sacrifice, and almo scared the wits out of the whole tribe, f good measure. Now what are we goin to do?"

Nobody answered. We all felt that, i military parlance, the initiative had passe away from us, and that we could on await events—meaning a mass attack b the Amalonga.

It was at this zero point in our affairs— and I am sorry to say in our courage a well—that Helen Herrington surprised u by saying, "I believe matters are less complicated than you think, for as I see it, th very fact that the priests have been kille is to our advantage."

We asked her to explain, and she sai "These Amalonga, like most of the Zambezi tribes, are a priest-ridden race. Thei *indunas* as a rule do not relish the influence of the *wonder dokters*, and my experience gained during the years that I traveled with my parents among the native has taught me that both the *indunas* a their people are only too eager to sha off the yoke of these so-called magician if someone will show up these cheats, a lead the way."

Sikonyela, who spoke no English, h turned to Morkel and asked, "What saye the *inkoosiezana*, she who has cheated t Great Smoke of its prey?"

Morkel interpreted, and the Zulu nodd his head vigorously.

"Truly," he exclaimed, "the whites a a great people. Even their women spe words of wisdom at the men's council war. *Inkoosies*, it is the truth; there a those among the Amalonga who will r joice at the death of those cursed *matag* Those wish us well, and if their word strong enough with the people, we shall have peace, for they have seen that, when we slew the *matagati*, we withheld our fire from the tribe and did not kill the defenseless common people. Also, *Inkoosies*, there was a belief that death by the hands of a foe could not touch the *matagati*, and behold, that belief we have shattered with this!" And the Zulu proudly waved the six-shooter with which he had killed the head priest.

"That's all very well, oh Sikonyela, but how are we to get in touch with these people," asked Van Wyk. "We fear they are going to attack us, and they think the same of us. It's no use sending anyone out with a white flag, for I am afraid that emblem of civilized warfare is not yet known in this neck of the woods. So—how are we going to show them we are friendly?"

The tall Zulu rose, and carefully draped his magnificent kaross around him. Then he struck an attitude that would have done credit to the Shakesperian stage, and announced: *"Inkoosies*, I go to the Amalonga people to speak words of peace. Fear not. No harm will come to me, for I shall tell them that the white men came to war only on the *matagati*. Also shall I say that henceforth they are not ruled by these *wonder dokters*, and that no longer will their sons and daughters be sought by these evil ones in a sacrifice to the Great Smoke. I go now. *Bayete! Bayete!"*

The Zulu lifted his great spear in salute, tucked the revolver, to which he had taken a decided fancy, under his kaross, and climbed over the barricade before we could make up our minds whether or not to accept his proposal.

"There goes a brave man and true," aid Morkel.

"Yes," agreed Van Wyk, "And what an ctor the world has lost in him! These igh-bred Zulus certainly possess the dra-atic instinct. Yes. I think a good deal ore of him than I do of those oily, mooth-spoken promoter johnnies of the oburg Stock Exchange."

This sally of little Van Wyk handed e a great laugh. To think of compar-g the physical and mental make-up of his splendid savage with that of the typ-al, flashy Johannesburg promoter! But smothered my mirth, and merely re-arked that I hoped the Amalonga would at least grant Sikonyela a hearing, and would not disrupt diplomatic relations by knocking him over the head with one of those knobkerries of which I had noticed a sinister prevalence in that evil-smelling armory of theirs.

CHAPTER VI

A BARGAIN WITH THE ENEMY

FOR over an hour we took turns watching for Sikonyela's return, or for signs of an attack, in case our messenger had been killed by the Amalonga. At last Van Wyk, who had been observing the road from between two boulders, called out, "Here come three men, and, thank the Lord, Sikonyela is one of them!"

We rushed to the barricade, and rolled rocks away from the entrance. There our Zulu ally stood impassively waiting, and behind him, unarmed save for their knobkerries, two men, dignified and composed as Sikonyela himself.

Here we had our first good opportunity to observe these Amalonga. They were a handsome set, distinctly different from the ordinary Bantu. The kinky hair and flat nose of the negro were lacking, and their complexion was decidedly lighter in hue. Morkel afterwards said that they looked uncommonly like some of the East Coast Swahilis, many of whom are credited with having strong infusions of the Arab and the ancient Phenician blood.

The Zulu was the first to speak. Motioning to the two Amalonga tribesmen, he announced: *"Inkoosies*, these men be *indunas* of the Amalonga. This," and he pointed to the tallest of the two, "is Moshesh, the *bwana induna*, and the other is Umtombo, his son. These men have long felt the bite of the sharp teeth of those jackals the *matagati*, and their hearts are glad to see them carrion for the vultures. They have seen the magic of the white *wonder dokters*, and they fear it. So they are come to speak words of peace."

Morkel, who always did the talking for us, answered, "It is well, oh, son of the blood of Chaka. Do thou again tell these men of the Amalonga that we come as friends. We would only be free to pass through their land, for we go to seek that which is hidden in the ancient canoes, and which is of no worth to the Amalonga, yet is greatly valued by the white men."

Sikonyela turned to the chieftains and addressed them in their language. They listened gravely, and then the chief *induna* replied, speaking slowly and deliberately. Sikonyela interpreted his answer. "The *induna* says that which is hidden in the canoes is of no worth in the eyes of his tribe. Yet the *matagati* have sometimes acquired part of it to make decorations in the temple. Also, he says, part of it was used, some years ago, by a mighty king of the South to buy off invasion. But the canoes are yet heavy with what remains, and they lie deep in the sand, which is rapidly filling the ancient channel."

"There you are," Van Wyk joyfully exclaimed as the Zulu interpreted. "A mighty king of the South. No one, of course, but old King Lobengula himself! And that's where he got the gold he sent to Cecil Rhodes. However, the old chief says that most of the treasure is still in the ships, so let's go!"

After some more talk it was agreed that we would be free to pass through the *stad* and the country of the Amalonga and proceed to the ancient canal of the Phenicians. It was further arranged that the *indunas* would assign men to help us dig the hulls out of the sand that engulfed them.

This bargain having been made to the satisfaction of both parties, we now released the captive Amalonga sentry from his uncomfortable position, and then, with the help of Jan and Sikonyela, made a grave for poor Herrington. They dug the grave in the soft soil, a few paces from the temple entrance to the side of the hollow road, while at the request of Morkel I took Miss Herrington inside the temple so that she would not witness the sad preparations for her unhappy father's interment. However, she knew well enough what we were about, and begged us to let her see the dead man for a last time. Then for a few minutes, her courage and poise forsook her as, throwing herself across the body, she wept bitterly and kissed the dead man's forehead until I gently drew her away.

At last we left the temple, and started to march toward the town of the Amalonga, trailing behind the two *indunas* of that tribe, and looking as unconcerned as we could. I will admit, however, that when we passed the altar of the Great Smok where the bodies of the dead *matagati* sti lay as they had fallen, my pulse quic ened. After all, I thought, these dea men had been the powerful leaders an masters of the Amalonga people. Did i not, therefore, stand to reason that thos priests who remained yet alive might sti have a large and vindictive following, an could we be sure that the two chieftai who were guiding us were not really leading us to slaughter?

However, when we passed the spot wher the head priest's body was lying, sho through the forehead with Sikonyela's revolver, there occurred that which set my fears at rest as far as the *indunas* wer concerned. These two worthies stoppe and the elder of the two, Moshesh, steppe forward, and began to harangue the dea body. It was quite a long address to make to a dead man, and that it was not a all complimentary became evident whe Moshesh suddenly landed a violent kick o the corpse. His son, Umtombo, dutifully followed this parental example, and the bent over the dead magician, whose alleged miracles had once been the pride an terror of the tribe, and taking hold of th dead man's long, gray beard, gave it violent tug.

As he did so, the head of the corp rolled to one side, and there was disclosed partly hidden under the long, gray locks, narrow band that circled the head.

"Jove, it is made of gold," Morkel e claimed, and bending over swiftly, h coolly detached the circlet from the hea of the dead priest. Though smeared wi blood, there was no doubt about it—th band was made of virgin gold.

"I saw an ornament like this once b fore," remarked Morkel. "That also wa taken from the head of a dead man, a Zul prince who was killed in battle with th whites. My grandfather often told me that fight, how they drove the Zulus int the river, firing their great elephant gu at the blacks, until the stream was literall red with the blood of the Ama-Zulu."

The Boer tucked the golden circlet i the large pocket of his coat, Umtombo sa isfied himself with one more savage kic at the body of his whilom spiritual mento and we continued our way.

We came to the edge of the great sto platform, and began to descend a stairw huge, uneven rocks, leading to the plain low. We covered another hundred yards, d then the rock formation ended, giving y to a deep, loamy soil, every inch of ich was cultivated with mealie plants d Kaffir-corn standing several feet high.

WE NOW observed, in the distance, a large throng of people, all looking expectantly in our direction. hey stood motionless and silent. Feelg ourselves the cynosure of all these eyes we marched forward to meet this silent ultitude, it became evident that we ould, somehow, have to stage-manage r approach in order to keep up our digty and reputation of great magicians. n Wyk nudged Morkel and myself and, thout more ado, the two Boers broke to an Afrikander chanty of the veld:

"It is too far to walk,
Too near to ride,
How shall I fix it
To have Sannie for a bride?"

It was fortunate, at the time, that I did t understand these Boer-Dutch words, I would never have had the hardihood to ep a straight face as we marched into e midst of these pop-eyed savages, singg the fatuous words of this South African eik song. As it was, I chanted with my ends at the top of my voice, and it was ident, from the respectful manner in hich the Amalonga gave way and opened thoroughfare for us, that we made the sired impression, and that they took us r very great *matagati* and *wonder dokters* deed.

Our *induna* guides conducted us through is gaping multitude to their *stad*, or kraal. his town of the Amalonga was not made of the regular, beehive type of dwelling hich I had observed in Natal and Mateleland, but consisted of many low, flatofed, one-room houses, built of slabs of te stone. On the roofs of these dwellgs *pampoen*, or pumpkins, mealies and her produce were drying in the sun. The orways were low, and naked children, eep and dogs were crawling in and out a happy and picturesque mêlée. Alys a dog fancier, I was particularly inested in the huge *Kaffir honde*—gaunt utes, spotted like leopards, of which ere seemed to be a multitude in the place. Van Wyk afterwards told me that these dogs were excellent for the hunt, that they could actually be trained to go after lion, and would stand beside the hunter at the critical moment, undaunted by the fearful onslaught of the king of beasts.

The *indunas* now led the way to a house that appeared somewhat larger than the rest, and this we entered, finding it well furnished with karosses, mostly of the silver jackal type, with full tail-ends of a beautiful shimmering sheen. The *indunas* entered the house with us, and held a brief colloquy with Sikonyela. Then they lifted their hands in salute and left.

"They say the white *inkoosies* will be the guests of the tribe here tonight," Sikonyela said. "They will send us food and drink, and tomorrow the *indunas* themselves will lead us to the canoes you have come to seek."

The chieftains were as good as their word, for three women now entered, bearing calabashes and earthenware filled with a quantity of wholesome food: such as roasted mealies, *hoender*, mutton, and last, but by no means least, plenty of newly made Kaffir beer and fresh milk. This was the first meal to which Miss Herrington sat down with us. She did the honors of the table in a most graceful manner, acting, as Van Wyk afterwards said, as if she were the lady of the house and we her welcome guests. Female company evidently was something to which the two Boers were unaccustomed, and both Helen and I had to smile when we noticed that little Van Wyk had slicked his hair and otherwise primped up in honor of the occasion. We made a good meal, arranged to take turns guarding the doorway during the night, wrapped ourselves in the warm karosses, and went to sleep. For Miss Herrington we arranged a little compartment of her own, running a hippo thong from one wall to the other, and fastening to this, by way of an improvised curtain, three large karosses of blesbok skin.

But, though I was dog-tired, I worried and could not sleep. The thing, now that our battle with the *matagati* was fought, seemed too easy. I could not take it for granted that this warlike tribe, superstitious as they might be, would treat us as friends, after what had happened.

Haunted by these thoughts, I at last decided that sleep was not for me that night, so I threw off my kaross, and quietly stepped over to the entrance where Van Wyk sat keeping watch, as I thought. But, as I approached him, I was greeted with a loud snore. The poor fellow was fast asleep—the result of overfatigue as well as of the heavy meal and the liberal potations of Kaffir beer he had regaled himself with. "Here's where I get the laugh on you, my friend," I thought as I lifted the rifle from Van Wyk's lap, and seated myself opposite him to mount guard in his stead.

I MUST have sat there for at least an hour, looking through the low doorway into the darkness beyond when at last the small fire in the room gave out. Van Wyk had slowly relaxed from his seated posture, and was lying full length on the cow-dung floor, snoring like a good one. The hut was now in the same inky darkness as the space beyond the doorway. I was getting cold and cramped, and was on the point of rising to my feet to hunt for my kaross, when a sound as if someone or something had bumped into the outer wall, drew my attention. The sound was very slight, yet it sufficed to make me wide-awake once more. I listened, straining every sense, and then I could have sworn to a whispering outside. Not daring to stir from the doorway, I nevertheless managed to land a kick in Van Wyk's general direction. He stopped snoring and heard my whispered, "Look out, there's trouble," for he rolled over to where I was lying and asked me, in a whisper, what the matter was. I answered, my lips against his ear, that I feared that the enemy was surrounding the hut, and that we were due for an attack.

"You stay here," Van Wyk said. "I'll wake up Morkel." A moment later the big fellow joined us, and the three of us kept silent watch.

For a long while we did not hear a sound, and I almost began to believe that my fears were groundless and that I had been a victim of hallucination. Just then Morkel whispered, "What's that?" From the doorway, or rather just inside the hut, there came a peculiar, sibilant sound—like a subdued hiss—such as of water that is just commencing to boil. It grew in volume. Then suddenly and full of horror, at the top of his voice: "Back, back for your lives!" yelled Morkel and I felt his hand drawing me with him. Bewilder we followed, and a second later Mork had thrust a faggot in the embers of t fire, illuminating the interior of the h We now saw that which makes me sh der in telling, something that often y wakes me from my sleep, for I can nev forget its horror! There, well within t entrance, some coiled and swaying fro side to side, and others wriggling in lo sinewy curves toward us, were what a peared to be an entire nest of snakes. A that they were the deadliest of all Afric snakes, the black *mamba,* or cobra, th terrible reptile whose bite means awful a instant death, was apparent from the hoo standing up over the huge, flat heads.

The snakes were a deadly rage, of whi we were the object, it was clear. V Wyk was the first to open fire. His g roared out in the narrow space of the h One of the snakes was shot clean thro the middle and lay there, wriggling ho ribly. And then I saw something th scared whatever wits I had left out of m making me forget all caution.

One of the serpents, instead of co tinuing straight at us, was trying to cra under the kaross we had suspended as partition for Helen. I dashed right at i aiming a blow with the butt end of m rifle. The snake literally threw hers backwards at me, and it certainly was mo luck than anything else that smashed i terrible head against my gun.

"Back, Yankee!" yelled Morkel, and jumped at the words, avoiding a lightni stroke from a six-foot *mamba* by a b inch or so. By now Sikonyela and J had also joined in the fray, and the Z particularly was doing great executi among the *mambas* with his long assag Two of the snakes tried to turn and cra away, but Sikonyela managed to deca tate one and pin the other to the floor, th disposing of the entire brood. The sho ing had awakened the whole *stad* a judging from the lights of many torches well as from the babel of voices, the ent tribe was milling around our hut.

Of course, there was not the slight doubt but that we owed the visit of th deadly *mambas* to some enemy or enem among the Amalonga. Sikonyela agr with us that, in all probability, those of priests who had not been killed in fighting were at the bottom of the thi

But he meant to find out, and, stringing the dead *mambas* on the blade of his assagai, our intrepid ally stepped from the hut.

The Zulu was gone but a little while, and told us, on his return, that he had consulted with the two *indunas* of the Amalonga. It was their opinion, he said that the deed had been planned and executed by the *matagati.* But, he added, nothing could be done, as the conspirators had left no other clue behind than the rattan basket which had evidently served to carry the snakes in, and the ownership of which could not be identified.

Nothing was to be done, it appeared, but to try and get a few hours sleep before the arrival of dawn. Helen Herrington, who had kept her head remarkably well during the gruesome visit of the snakes, declared that she could not sleep another wink, and decided to stay awake, as did the two Boers, who now mounted guard. Tired out, I slept like a log, until awakened by a queer medley of sounds, in which I distinguished barking dogs, crying children and bleating sheep.

Notwithstanding the nightmare we had passed through, our entire party was in the very best of spirits, for this was the day on which we were to set eyes on the treasure of the Zambezi. Yet I could not entirely share the feeling of my companions that all was well. For one thing, I knew that the *matagati,* having failed to kill us in the night, were likely to try again. And then, I did not trust those two *indunas,* Moshesh and Umtombo. I reasoned that even if we had killed the head priest, their hereditary enemy, this did not imply that the *indunas* had become our friends. Rather did I suspect them of planning to get us out of the way as soon as the opportunity offered.

"Well, Yankee," said Van Wyk, dealing me a good-natured, resounding whack on the back, "it appears we are at last on the final lap of our long trek. Are you all set for the gold of the Zambezi?"

"Here, don't talk so much, you little roughneck," said Morkel, giving his partner a shove that almost sent him through the wall of the house. "And don't you be too cocksure about that Zambezi gold. Remember—there's many a slip!"

But, though he spoke in his usual pessimistic vein, it was evident from his looks and actions that the big Boer also felt in the best of spirits. It was therefore a happy, forward-looking party that set off, directly breakfast was over, through the green mealie fields for the ancient canal of the Zambezi.

CHAPTER VII

SHIPS OF GOLD

FIRST we reached the lower branch of the river, flowing east with many twists and turns to thread its way ultimately through the hot sands of the East Coast into the broad Indian Ocean. Here our guides took us a short way upstream until we reached a spot where quite a number of native boats had been drawn up on the beach. They shoved three of these vessels into the water and started to row across. When we were in the middle of the river I experienced a novel thrill when the water in front of our boat was suddenly agitated by a broad, brown monster which proved to be a hippopotamus. I grasped my rifle, but Van Wyk restrained me, saying, "Sit tight. These *nylpaarde* will not bother us if we only leave them alone."

He pointed to the other side of the boat, and there were two more of the brutes, the upper parts of their bodies entirely above water. Our rowers seemed to take but little notice of the hippos, though they backwatered the boat to keep her away from the monster ahead of us. Helen Herrington was seated beside me, and though her eyes dilated at sight of the huge animals, she made no outcry, nor did she rock the boat as many of her sisters would have done. We reached the other side without coming to close quarters with the hippos, and set off through the reeds which here grew in abundance. We then stumbled through the jungly growth for almost three miles, and came to a part where the water had flooded the land several inches. This made progress difficult but, knowing ourselves close to the object of our long quest, we pushed on regardless of hardship, and at last emerged from the jungle on the banks of a stream.

It was as straight as a die! "The ancient canal," we chorused. There was no doubt about it. This watercourse had been dug by men—in all probability by those long-dead, heroic seafarers who, at the command of Hiram, King of Tyre in Phenicia, had set out for the fabled land of Ophir to bring back gold, ivory and other treasure. The object of the canal, it was evident had been to eliminate the cataracts which made navigation impossible on the main body of the stream.

The banks of the canal had crumbled, and in other places the water had eaten into the land, destroying the symmetry of the course, but on the whole it had been wonderfully preserved. Yet it was now, after some twenty centuries, rapidly disintegrating, for in many places sedimentation had taken place, and numerous sand banks and small islands had come into being with the passing of time.

We did not have much time to speculate on the matter, for now our two *induna* guides, and the Amalonga tribesmen who were to help us uncover the gold, had dragged two long boats out of the reeds, and were motioning us to go aboard. They pulled rapidly downstream, keeping well to the center of the waterway. Here there was quite a strong current, and for at least an hour we shot forward at a great speed. Then, right ahead of us, in the very middle of the canal, we observed a sand bank covered with some low growth. To this the *induna*, Moshesh, pointed, saying a few words to Sikonyela, who thereupon told us, "*Inkoosies,* that which is hidden lies there."

Our excitement had now reached fever height. The instant that the boats were beached we jumped out and waited impatiently for the *indunas* to lead the way.

The place was cursed with millions of tiny flies and mosquitoes and this, added to the stretch of deep sand we had to cross, made the going hard. The heat was terrific, and it even affected our Hottentot servant and Sikonyela.

I was lingering behind, assisting Helen, who was almost overcome by the heat, when I saw that our party had come to a stop, and that Van Wyk was waving his hat to us.

"Great scott, they've found the ships of gold!" I panted, and then both Helen and I broke into a run. Another hundred yards, and our eyes witnessed a marvelous sight indeed.

There, sunk deep in the river sand which had evidently been removed only in part by the *matagati*, were two ships, but not such ships as we know today! For vessels of this build had not sailed the seas for many, many centuries. And, beholding those low decks, those tiers and tiers of rowers' benches, those poops and bowsprits, my thoughts flew back to the history book pictures of the biremes of the Phenicians.

The galleys were marvelously well preserved, though the heat had caused the stout timbers to crack, admitting the sand on all sides. Evidently this Zambezi sand had most effectively sealed the ships from all contact with the air, thus preserving the stout beams throughout the centuries.

"Oh, it's glorious," cried Helen. "Cannot you just vision these galleys as they pulled out of Tyre, with the slaves straining at the oars? And her captain, in tunic, breastplate and helmet, as he steers his ship. Oh, they were ships like these that fought at Actium and sealed the fate of Cleopatra and Anthony!"

THE two Boers, although they were not students of history, were also much impressed, and the stolid Morkel remarked that he had seen pictures of ships like these in his father's bible.

Sikonyela and the Amalonga tribesmen were the only members of the expedition who did not appear particularly impressed, and the Zulu impatiently broke into our raptures, saying, "*Inkoosies,* we must return to the kraal before the sun sets. Shall I order these men to dig?"

"Yes," answered Morkel, "command them to dig, and we will take a hand too."

With that he took hold of one of the big, awkward spades, made of native *ysterhout,* and commenced shoveling the sand away from the side of one of the vessels. We all followed suit and worked with such energy that we soon had dug a narrow tunnel which led us to an opening in the hull, evidently the work of the *matagati* on their most recent visit to the treasure.

"I suppose," panted Van Wyk as he drove his spade into the sand, "that this is the hole they made when they got some of the gold for Lobengula."

"Very likely," said I, leaning forward beside him and peering into the inner darkness of the galley's hold. That same instant something gave way, and both Van Wyk and I tumbled into the galley.

I landed on my head, and was momentarily stunned by the impact. When I came to I heard Van Wyk groping around in the darkness, expressing his feelings in a choice selection of Boer-Dutch expletives.

"Are you all right, Yankee?" he called.

"Yes," I responded, "where are you?"

He struck a match, and we now vaguely made out our surroundings. On all sides were nothing but timbers and sand.

"Well, where's all the gold?" queried the Boer, striking another match.

The place appeared as bare and empty as before, but just then I became aware of the curiously uneven surface on which we were standing. I drove my toes into the sand, and the next moment was hopping around, holding my foot which had come into painful contact with some hard object.

"What's the matter?" asked Van Wyk, striking his third match.

I bent over and picked up the object on which I had stubbed my toe, and which felt curiously smooth and cool. Van Wyk, at the risk of burning his fingers, held the light close to it, and then we both let out a yell that was heard and answered by our companions outside.

"Die goud! Die goud!" was Van Wyk's version, and: "As I live—a bar of pure gold!" I yelled.

Then, like a couple of lunatics, this phlegmatic South African and I, a staid citizen of the great Lone Star State, danced around and around in the hold of this ancient galley of King Hiram, buried for centuries in a sand bank of an African river.

CHAPTER VIII

TREACHERY!

WHEN we came to our senses, we decided that it was time to rejoin our companions. So we set to work, piling up as many of the bars as we could find in the darkness, until we had built a heap that almost reached to the hole through which we had so unceremoniously entered, and the whereabouts of which we could distinguish by the few rays of light it admitted into our golden dungeon. I climbed on top of this heap, and Van Wyk, after heaving one of the gold bars through the aperture as proof conclusive to our friends on the outside, hoisted himself on my shoulders and thence out through the hole.

He had hardly done so, when I heard him exclaim in amazement. Then his arms were thrust through the hole toward me, and he called:

"Hurry, old man, hurry, let me pull you out. There's the devil to pay!"

Straining my knees against the timbers, and holding on to the Boer's powerful arms, I dragged myself through the hole, and lay panting in the sand beside him. I then looked around, and understood the cause of his alarm. For our companions were gone. Neither of Helen, Morkel, Sikonyela or Jan, nor of the Amalonga tribesmen, was there a trace!

But there were several indications that our friends had met with foul play! A long assagai, the handle of which was covered with springbok hide, and which I recognized as Sikonyela's, was lying in the sand, broken in two. A little further I found the *kappie,* or bonnet, as worn by the Boer women, which Helen had been using to shield her complexion from the sun. And still further I picked up the ancient felt hat that had been the property of Jan the Hottentot. It was evident that our friends had been suddenly attacked by the Amalonga, who must have rushed them down to the river while we were yet in the hold of the galley.

Van Wyk was the first to recover and jump to his feet exclaiming, "The Amalonga have betrayed us! I never did trust that *induna,* Moshesh. They captured our people while we were in the hold of that confounded galley, fussing with all the gold."

He drew his revolver and I followed suit. We dashed through the low shrubs, and as we ran I shuddered to think that we might find the bodies of our friends behind any of the bushes as we passed. A few more seconds, and we broke from the jungle onto the riverbank and saw how the land lay.

The Amalonga had pushed the canoes into the river, and one boat was almost in midstream. The other, in which I distinguished both Helen and Morkel, was but a few yards off the bank, not yet in deep water. With a wild yell that was answered by the Amalonga in the boat, Van Wyk dashed into the river, firing as he came.

I also waded in, undeterred by the assagais which were now whizzing by us. Then, as the rowers were bending over their oars intent on gaining the comparative safety of the deeper water, I stood still and aimed at the *induna*, Moshesh, who was giving orders to his men. The wily old chieftain guessed my intention, for he ducked his head, and my first bullet went over. Aiming lower I fired again, and this time hit him full in the chest. The Amalonga chief jumped up, threw his arms wide and splashed over the side. His fall upset the canoe, and the next instant the river was full of the bobbing heads of swimming Amalonga. Intent on saving their skins they did not bother about their two captives. Wading deeper into the water, and swimming when I got out of my depth, it was my good fortune to clutch Helen's dress as she went down for the second time. As I carried her ashore in my arms, Van Wyk was just dragging Morkel onto the sand bank where he proceeded to cut the hippo leather thongs with which the Amalonga had bound him.

Freed from his bonds, Morkel jumped up and pointed to the second canoe. "Here, hand me a gun," he exclaimed. "They have got Sikonyela and Jan in that boat."

In an effort to save the swimming Amalonga, the second boat had now drifted closer to the shore. Morkel ran into the water until it reached to his armpits, and now showed the tribesmen some of the white man's marksmanship. Joining the big Boer, I also opened fire on the canoe, aiming carefully so as not to hit Sikonyela or our Hottentot servant.

At this very moment, as the fortunes of war would have it, a huge hippo thrust its ugly head above the surface as if to inquire what unseemly racket was disturbing the tropic calm of its African riverhome. The Amalonga in the boat were by this time replying to our attack by throwing their assagais, and the hippopotamus must have been struck in one of its few vital spots by either an assagai or by one of our bullets.

NOW the African hippo, for all its immense size, is usually a peaceful citizen, but it turns into a devil incarnate when attacked. Whatever the cause may have been on this particular occasion, the huge beast suddenly dashed straight at the canoe of the Amalonga. There was a despairing yell, a sound of snapping timbers as the brute lifted the boat clean off the surface of the water and crunched it in its immense jaws, and then the tribesmen, canoe and hippopotamus all disappeared beneath the great flood.

Horror struck us as we stood there, gazing at the spot where the tragedy had taken place. Then two or three heads appeared above water.

"There they are," yelled Van Wyk, pointing to two swimmers who were fighting the current in an effort to reach our sand bank. All we could do was stand and watch, but fortunately both Jan and Sikonyela proved to be excellent swimmers. Just then, to our horror, the dripping brown back and immense head of the hippo again showed above water, apparently surveying the battlefield. We held our breath fearing that it would see and attack Sikonyela and Jan. Instead, however, the beast's attention was drawn to the three Amalonga survivors who were rapidly approaching the opposite bank of the river, and these it immediately rushed after.

What now happened was awful. One of the tribesmen chanced to look back over his shoulder, saw the hippo coming with the speed of a steamboat, and dived under. Coming up for air a minute later, this swimmer wisely changed his course toward us and the sand bank. But the other two men were overtaken by the great, merciless river dweller, and I distinctly saw them seized, one after the other, by the enormous jaws, and literally bitten through and through.

Turning my eyes from the fearful sight, I helped Morkel pull our exhausted Hottentot servant ashore, and we were glad to find that he had not been hit by either our shots or by the enemy's assagais. A minute later Sikonyela stepped ashore without our help and shook the water off his ebony skin. Then we stood and waited for the lone Amalonga survivor who was making his way toward us, swimming like one completely exhausted. It was Umtombo, the younger *induna*, son of Moshesh.

The instant he stumbled ashore Morkel, Sikonyela and I laid hands on him, and tied him securely with the thongs which we had removed from Morkel a little while earlier. In the meantime Helen had made herself as useful as any of us, for with that sound, practical sense we had admired before in her, she had waded to her waist in the water, seized the overturned boat in which Moshesh had met his death, and had guided it ashore. In the heat of the combat we men had completely forgotten the canoe. Had it not been for Helen's foresight, we would have been forced to choose between death on the sand bank, or a swim across the powerful current of the hippopotamus and crocodile haunted stream.

We were all more than delighted with the recovery of the boat, and even the stolid and undemonstrative Morkel was so gratified that he shook Helen again and again by the hand, assuring her in a quaint medley of English and Dutch that she was a "*meissie*" worth a dozen men.

In a few words Morkel told us what had happened. It appears that when Van Wyk and I were in the hold of the galley, our friends had been suddenly set upon by the treacherous Amalonga. The attack had been so sudden and unexpected that they were unable to make use of their weapons. The tribesmen had immediately rushed them down toward the riverfront. On the way Sikonyela had endeavored to break away, but was overpowered. When the Amalonga ordered them into the boats, Morkel had made his bid for freedom, whereupon Moshesh had ordered him tied up.

We were all so completely worn out, that we threw ourselves on the sand, in the shade of a large bush, for a brief nap. It seemed to me that I had hardly closed my eyes when I was awakened by a blood-curdling yell from our Hottentot servant. There Jan was, hopping around on one foot, the while a curious-shaped, long-necked creature was nipping at his other foot. As I went to his assistance I saw that the two Boers were rolling on the sand, helpless with laughter. The Hottentot was shouting at the top of his voice, "Please boss, pull that turtle off me!"

At last the turtle let go and scuttled off toward the river, but it was intercepted by Van Wyk who thrust an oar under its belly and turned it over on its back, rendering it helpless. Jan now approached his whilom tormentor, and quickly despatched it, declaring that he would prepare a tasty turtle steak before we departed from the island. He kept his word and, the turtle being a large specimen such as abound along the Zambezi, we enjoyed a satisfactory meal.

CHAPTER IX

THE END OF THE TREK

As WE did not wish to pass the night on the sand bank, it now was time for us to move. But—there remained that treasure of gold, and neither Morkel, Van Wyk nor I intended to return empty-handed after all we had gone through. We knew we would only be able to take a small part of the gold with us, and there was also the problem of which route to take in order to avoid the country of the Amalonga. Furthermore, we had lost our rifles in the sinking of the canoes, and our entire armament now consisted of only two revolvers and some ammunition. Morkel summed up the situation:

"We cannot return the way we came, for we would have the entire Amalonga tribe on our back. However I believe that by letting our boat drift with the current down the river to the east, we must eventually reach the spot where this canal again joins the parent stream. From that point we should be able to skirt the country of the Amalonga until we reach the exact spot where our Basuto boy is waiting with the mules and supplies. Seems logical doesn't it?"

We agreed, and Morkel strolled to where the captive *induna*, Umtombo, was lying securely hogtied. Now, brave as the Amalonga are reputed to be, there was no doubt that this particular representative of the tribe was in a blue funk. Having been an eye-witness to the fate of his father and his fellow countrymen, he was fully convinced that these formidable white men were very strong medicine, with whom it was folly to argue.

So, when the Boer jerked him to his feet, he just rolled his eyes like any frightened darky, and was very meek and subdued indeed. Through Sikonyela, our faithful interpreter, Morkel put several questions to the captive chieftain and satisfied himself that we could indeed avoid the kraal of the Amalonga on our return trip.

"Come along, fellows," he said, "let's go get that gold. Miss Herrington, you had better stay here to watch that nigger. Here's a revolver, though you will hardly need it, for I have tied him securely."

With that Morkel led the way once again to the ships of gold. I noticed that he carried a long thong of hippo leather. When we arrived at the galley he ordered Jan to crawl through the hole, and to tie the bars of gold to the leather strap, one after the other.

"We will take twenty bars," he announced. "That's as much as we can possibly stow in the boat without sinking her." After we had pulled up the bars that Jan sent us from the hold, and had counted the full twenty of them, Morkel announced:

"That's all. The rest will stay here until we get a chance to come with a larger expedition. But meanwhile we don't return empty-handed, and will have something to show for our trouble."

We divided the gold among the five of us, and it was some job to carry this weight through the hot afternoon across the deep sand. But we got it safely down to the boat, stowing ten of the bricks on each side. We then embarked, the captive *induna* being seated in the stern.

Taking the only oar we had saved, Van Wyk steered the canoe into the middle of the stream. There the powerful current took hold of her, and we went racing down the ancient canal in the general direction of the Indian Ocean. Van Wyk was frequently compelled to use his oar to avoid hitting rocks or sand banks, and once we sped clean through a promising little family consisting of a cow hippopotamus and her young, but no harm came to us. At last Sikonyela called that he could see, way ahead, the point where two rivers, one from the north and the other from the south, effected their junction with the canal. The current had now become like a millrace, and as Van Wyk could do but little steering with his oar, we had to trust to luck in making a landing on the southern bank of the main stream which was fully a mile wide here. Fortune favored us, though we hit the side with a shock that nearly smashed the canoe.

I jumped out and held the boat before she could whirl around and drift off; and we climbed out, Sikonyela having released Umtombo from his bonds. Morkel ordered our captive to carry five of the gold bars, and divided the others between us five men. Then he ordered Umtombo to lead the way.

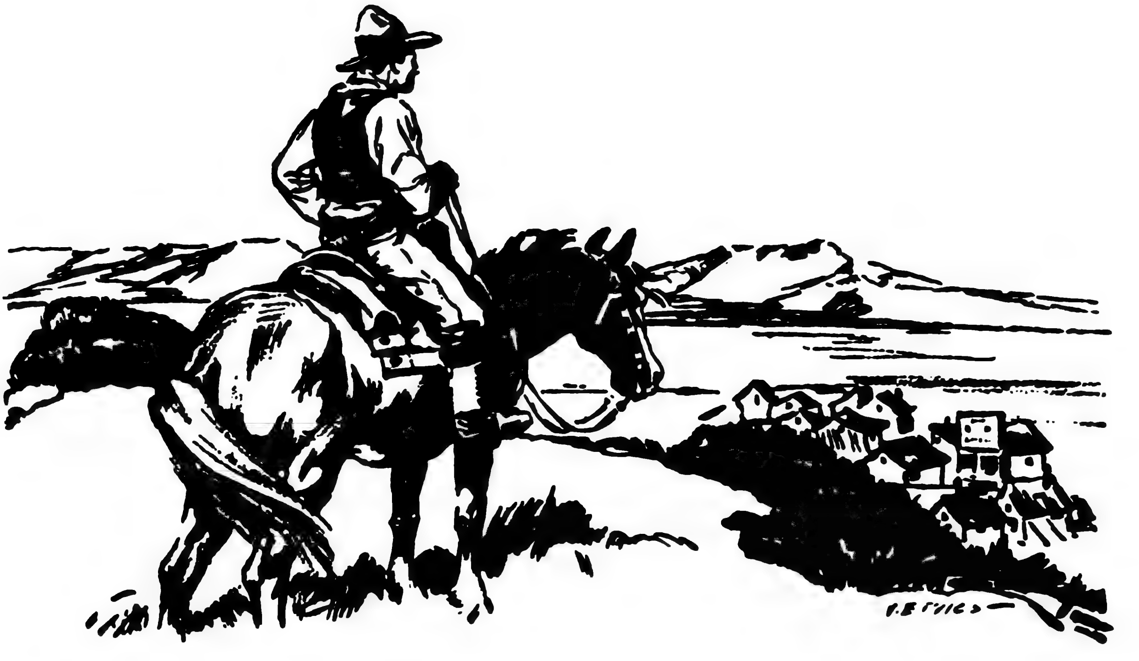
IT MUST have been late in the afternoon when we left the river, marching forward steadily and sweating under our weight of gold. We rested frequently, but at last, just before sunset, we entered the land of reeds, on the borders of the country of the Amalonga. Another two miles brought us within sight of the Sacred Tree, and then, cautiously picking our way through the reeds, we at last found our encampment intact, no harm having befallen our Basuto servant, the mules and supplies.

Sikonyela now disclosed that he knew of a trail that ran over a ridge slightly above the surrounding swamp. This trail, he asserted, would be perfectly safe to travel at night. So we provided Helen with a makeshift saddle of blankets on one of the mules, and pushed through the reeds in the dark. When day broke we had passed the swamp, and found our Cape-carts where we had left them.

As the time had now come to rid ourselves of our villainous Amalonga captive, Sikonyela told the *induna* that the white men gave him his freedom and that he was to immediately return to his tribe. Evidently Umtombo had feared that we would mete out justice in the Amalonga fashion, and that we would kill him. He moved off, slowly at first, and glancing back fearfully, but gathering speed as he went. At last, having got near to the jungle, he made a sudden dash for it, and disappeared from view. His retreat had been so ridiculous that we burst out laughing, and that was the last I ever saw of the Amalonga, or wish to see.

We safely reached Pretoria in the Transvaal, where we took the gold to the South African Mint and sold it. The proceeds were divided amongst us white men, the natives also receiving a share.

As to Helen—her share of the gold and mine were one. For the way of a man with a maid is the same in Africa as elsewhere in this best of worlds. It was in Pretoria that we announced our engagement to our Boer friends. They were not surprised, Van Wyk admitted.



JIM FELLOM

Relates an Adventure that Happened

ONCE ON MOHAVE

THAT? Oh, that's where a bullet went through my hand, six years ago. Looks like I've been crucified, don't it? At first it sort of paralyzed it. You'll notice I can't uncrook my fingers; see, that's as far as they'll go. All they're good for now is to rake in the coin. Not bad—eh?

But I'm not kicking. It might have been worse. I saw the time, though, when I used to just sit and stare at that hand and cuss it and a card-sharp they called "High-Low Jack"—John Lordham was how he signed his checks. He was a sporty sort, wore diamonds as big as Brussels sprouts and put cologne in his bath water.

Yes, he did! And there he was living in Archibald Gulch, the dirtiest camp on the Mohave Desert, where they dry-washed their dishes—water was half a dollar a gallon—and wore their clothes till they could stand up of themselves.

Hold on—I didn't say *I* did that! The Archibald Gulchers did. I didn't live there, then. I'd got in a little jam over in the Green Range and jumped out to where there was no Western Union or tin-buzzers—deputy sheriffs, is what you'd call them. But I fell in love with Archibald Gulch later on; though, at first, it looked as if Old Mister Tough Luck was going to make me hate it forever.

You see, I'm one of those peculiar pelicans who believe all men are created equal, as they say, and I'm touchy as dynamite when somebody high-hats me—treats me like I'm something nasty. You don't admire that, either, do you? What's more, women had always been the grief of my life. I just couldn't help falling for them. Don't laugh. I'm telling you the truth. I was just helpless when the sweet things began throwing their eyes at me.

Anyhow, there's a girl living in Archibald Gulch—that little jam I spoke of getting into in the Green Range was over another girl, but she don't figure in this yarn—and all the time I'd been patting myself on the back, thinking that I'd come to an overall town. I'd sort of sickened on nice blue eyes and slim ankles, for a spell.

As I said, Archibald Gulch was the dirtiest burg on the California desert—

almost is, yet. It was only a handful of old broken-down shacks and false fronts, leaning against one another as if they were drunk and dassen't move for fear they'd tumble over, with a rocky, dusty road separating them. It stood in the dead center of Tecolote Mesa, and when I got my first look at it, maybe ten miles off, I told my horse that it looked as if God Almighty had swept the trash of the mesa into a pile and forgotten to burn it up. That's just exactly what it looked like.

What's that? Oh, High-Low Jack hung out there because there was good pickings! You ought to have guessed that. There were about six big mines working three crews in a little chain of funny hills, a bunch of red pimples festering up out of the desert; and the pay rolls used to come roaring into Archibald Gulch, twice a month and regular as a clock, for a snorting, cavorting jamboree. And those hairy hill-billies sure knew how to put it on. High-Low generally extracted the most of them pay rolls, practically without pain. He was a wizard with a deck.

Well, sir, I was a cowpuncher in them days, same as I am now, and I didn't have education enough to bother me. It don't, yet. Just to show you: night before last I was listening to the radio, right over in that drug store, and I asked the boss to tune in on Y. M. C. A. A drummer in town told me it was a new station putting on some rich stuff. Anyway, as I was saying, education and I were perfect strangers, except that I'd educated this hand of mine so as I could shoot the winkers off a chipmunk with my eyes crossed. That bullet sure robbed it of its education, didn't it?

IT WAS around the middle of the afternoon, about two weeks before the Fourth of July, when I rode into Archibald Gulch. All I could see was a couple of dozen dogs scratching off fleas in the shade, and one man, the doctor. Somebody had been sunstroked, and the pill-roller was sweating his way down the street like he was making a getaway. I was disgusted with the looks of the town, right off the jump.

I'd seen water tank burgs along the railroad that were a little bit jazzier than cemeteries, that's all. But, believe me, they were howling, hilarious, hell-raising cities alongside of Archibald Gulch. Was it dead? Say, friend, it was cremated. You know how dead that is! You see, there were only something like fifty people that stuck it out there. It was hot as hell itself. Anyhow, it looked as if they slept in between the pay days at the mines, waiting for the flood of good spenders to come pouring down out of the red hills. Then all the business men would wake up and get the money while the getting was good, and go to sleep again, like a spider waits for a fly.

But, as I said, I was disgusted with the place, and yet, on second thought, I felt rather thankful it was so dead and dirty. The red dust was six inches thick on the main street, and every shack in town was coated inside and out with it. And so, I figured, it was God-forsaken and hard enough to get to, to discourage old Sheriff Warburton from even looking for me there— Oh, I only gave the undertaker a job he hadn't been expecting, that's all! A strange buckaroo—nobody knew him—dropped into our dance pickled, and insisted on kissing a girl I was sure was different, and I insisted he wouldn't. And, he didn't.

All right—now, where was I? Oh, yes — Well, I rode into Archibald Gulch, and got off and tied my horse to a hitching rack in front of a saloon, and walked in to buy a drink and inquire if there was a stable in town. You'd naturally think you'd find somebody in a saloon, wouldn't you? This is before prohibition, you understand. But there wasn't. I banged on the bar and peeked into a couple of card rooms and hollered. Not even the bartender was there. Anyhow, I got tired of waiting, and took a drink on the house, for luck. And just as I was putting down my glass, what do you suppose?

The back door opened, and in pops a girl. She stops, and we both stand and stare at one another.

I told you a while ago that I'd figured Archibald Gulch for an overall town—that I'd kind of soured on the fair sex. Well, here was another one of them, and it looked like I was the center of attraction, no fooling!

When it comes to picking pretty women, I'm just silly enough to think I'm the alligator's pinfeathers. Of course, the surest way is to see them the first thing in the morning, soon as they wake up in curl-papers; but us men can't do that always. Anyway, I'm here to tell you that that girl was pretty as any flower you've ever seen. Her hair was dark brown and thick, with a sort of white fire skipping through it when she moved her head. And you ought to have seen what eyes she had—kind of bright blue with black centers, and long silken lashes half hiding them. You know how like velvet some roses look? Well, that's exactly how her cheeks — But I won't bother describing her. Honest, she belonged in Archibald Gulch about as much as a bouquet of violets in a hog-wash.

She just stood and eyed me without speaking for a spell. And, somehow, I kind of felt mean. There I was behind the bar, making myself at home when the boss was out. But I didn't aim to let her get the wrong idea of me. I dug down in my pocket and chucked a half a dollar into the glass I'd drank out of, and started mosying off as if I had important business up the street. That got her talking.

"Do—do you know where Doctor Lyman went?" she called to me. Her voice was sweet as old-fashioned music. I thought it quivered.

I jerked off my sombrero, hesitated a moment, then began slouching slowly over to her.

"I ain't got the least notion, miss. But if you have, just tell me where he is and I'll go dig him up for you," said I. And then I noticed that she'd been crying.

She shook her head. "I don't know. Perhaps— I think I'll wait a little while for him."

I had stopped about two paces away from her. She was working her fingers nervous like, and tears and fears were fighting it out on her pretty face to see which would win.

"If there's anything I can do, miss, why just say so. Or, maybe, I'd better hunt up the doctor. Is anyone sick?" I asked her.

"Yes, and I—" She seemed to go to pieces all of a sudden, as if she just had to confide in somebody. "My—my brother is terribly sick. He's become delirious. I can't keep him in—in bed. I'm afraid he'll kill himself, or—or wander off."

"Why, why didn't you say so before, miss? He ought to be strapped down. I'll go with you. We'll fix him up in a jiffy," said I.

The way that little thing thanked me paid me double for nothing. And out the back door we went, her leading the way.

Across lots, we ran; through the backyards of Archibald Gulch. I never figured there was so many tin cans in the world until I got to wading over five acres of them—me, in my high-heeled boots, and I had to kind of slip my arm around her to keep her from falling. At that, she did. She stepped on one of the durned things and her feet shot out from under her—bang, she lit! We both got red as turkey gobblers, and to cover up my embarrassment, as the fellow says, I picked her up in my arms and carried her out of danger. She might have turned her ankle, you understand.

MAYBE a quarter of a mile from town, there was a gash in the mesa, a hollow that a cloudburst had scooped out at some time or other, perhaps fifty feet deep, and hot as Death Valley. Under one of the walls stood a dugout. And would you believe it, the bottom of that little hollow was all vegetables and trees, a sure-enough Garden of Eden! Yes, there was a spring there. And that's where High-Low Jack got his bath water that he put cologne in, like I was telling you.

Well, we ran down the road, cut in the side of the cliffs, reached the dugout. I followed the girl in, and lying all sprawled out on the kitchen floor among a lot of busted dishes, was a tall young fellow, maybe twenty-four, face all sunk in like he's been sick for a long time. He looked dead, but I put my ear to his heart and found it was still pumping—not much, but pumping; and that was something.

"He's petered out, that's all," said I to the girl, who had begun to sob. "Get me a rope. Where do I lay him?"

She showed me into a little room—there were two of them besides the kitchen—and I carried him in and put him in bed. Then she fetched me a half-inch manila and I tied him down.

"I reckon he'll sleep several hours," said I. "It's mighty lucky you wasn't here when he had that spasm. He might have hurt you."

She followed me into the kitchen, and we both stood and looked at the wreck. He'd smashed everything he could get at—busted plates, swept the grub off the shelves, heaved pots and pans through the windows. I'd never heard of a sick man being delirious in just that way except he'd been drinking heavy. But I didn't let on to Annabelle about that.

Yes, Annabelle Fennimore was her name. His was Tim. I felt awful sorry for her. She was just broken-hearted over things in general. So I jumped in and helped her put the room in shape. And afterwards, we both sat down and talked together.

And we get pretty well acquainted. She's in trouble and I'm somebody to talk to who'll sympathize with her, and she lets me in on some of her private affairs. As, for instance: Their folks had died and left them this two acre sunken garden, and they'd leased the spring to some fellows who supplied Archibald Gulch with water from it; that Tim had overworked himelf and went to bed sick and couldn't deliver the vegetables—they kept the town in carrots, turnips and such green fodder; that the doctor and medicines had knocked a big hole in their bank account. She told me a lot of things like that, personal things.

Then it come my turn to say something about myself. That kind of stuck me. I had to lie to her, and I hated to do that worse than chopping off a finger. But I couldn't tell her I'd killed a man and picked on Archibald Gulch to hide out. I'd have been a damned fool, wouldn't I? So, I just told her my name was Phil Stone—it's Phil Giles, you know—and that I was cutting for the Arizona ranges.

Well, sir, the sun went down in the hollow, and those plots of vegetables and the fig trees and a small patch of flowers growing in front of the dugout began to smell like anything but the burnt-up desert as the air cooled. A couple of tiny yellow birds with crimson breasts, as if their little throats were cut and bleeding, teetered on a sunflower right outside the door and sang as if they wanted to let us know how happy they were.

Tim hadn't come to, and didn't give any signs that he would for some time. And then Annabelle suggested that I ought to go and get my horse and put him in their shed to feed, while I had supper with her. She was nervous about staying alone, even though I had her brother tied down. You couldn't blame her, neither. Besides, we'd agreed that I'd tell the doctor to come.

So I walked back to town, and there I met Doctor Lyman, a sort of hard-eyed old Gila monster, saloonkeeper and pill-roller all in one. That's a pretty swell combination, ain't it? Well, he told me he'd been called out on a case of sunstroke that afternoon, which was why he wasn't in when Annabelle and I met one another.

He just snickered about Tim's condition, saying he was the champion boozehound of the Mohave and got the heebie-jeebies every so often—and got over them.

"Where's Lordham? He's usually playing big brother on such occasions," he laughed, kind of nasty. "Anyway, I'm too busy to get out there before midnight."

"I don't know the gent," said I; and I felt funny, as if a deputy sheriff had suddenly put his hand on my shoulder. I hadn't figured on a rival.

"If you hang out in Archibald Gulch another twenty-four hours, son, and flirt around Fennimore Hollow, you'll come to know High-Low Jack better than what'll be good for you," he winked at me, as he turned to wait on a cash customer.

Anyhow, back I rode to Fennimore Hollow. But I did some mighty tall thinking before I got there. I wasn't the kind to graze my herd on another man's range, and I made up my mind to give Annabelle some excuse about not being able to stay for supper, and say good-by to her. Understand, now, I wasn't worrying over what this High-Low Jack Lordham might do to me! I didn't have that much imagination, and I wasn't yellow, though my favorite fruit is oranges. But I've always figured a man who tried to cut in on a pair of lovers as a whole lot lower than a sneak thief.

IT WAS close onto dark when I drew up in front of the dugout and got off my horse. Annabelle was standing at the door, waiting. Happening to look past her, I could see the kitchen table already set for two, the lamp lit, the bread cut, a bouquet of flowers in a jar. I got the smell of cooked vegetables, and steak was frying.

"I'm—I'm awful sorry, but—but—You've been waiting, haven't you?" I just couldn't say what I wanted to.

"It's all right," she smiled. "I didn't mind it a bit. He's still asleep. I've been praying that he won't wake up till morning. You'll find hay and grain in that shed," pointing to a lean-to a short space away.

I looked at her for a moment, and, I don't know why, my blood began to run sort of hot in my veins. She had changed dresses and fixed her hair and, as she stood there in the first velvet shades of night, she seemed like some lovely being—something like the spirit of Home Sweet Home welcoming me in. I'd never known what it was to be lonesome, but if I'd have said good-by and ridden away right then, I'd have been miserable all the rest of my days.

I put up my horse. I looked up at the stars. They were winking at me, and I winked back at them, happy as if I still wore knee-pants. A faint breeze came down off the mesa and played hide-and-go-seek in that little sunken garden, rustling the growing things till they seemed to laugh. The spring gurgled and gurgled, making a sound like some one praying to himself.

She sat opposite to me at the table, and the way she waited on me you'd think I was a person of importance. It made me kind of bashful—and, then I caught myself eating with my knife! I'd always considered table manners just plain tommyrot—the way folks who thought they were something, and weren't anything, showed off. But I changed my mind that night; and let me tell you, friend, it was hell not to be able to drink my coffee out of my saucer. What I did do was watch how she ate—and she sure was graceful—and simply follow suit, like they do in whist. And all the time I was falling in love with her faster than I had any idea of.

Gee, that was a wonderful meal! Still, if you'd asked me whether I'd had steak and onions or mulligan stew, I couldn't have told you without looking around the table for the evidence! That's how badly balled up I was.

Then we sat and talked for maybe an hour. Once I remembered what Doc Lyman had told me about High-Low Jack, and how he stood in solid with Annabelle. And it struck me funny that she hadn't even mentioned his name. I got suspicious over that. It was just like a woman to flirt around with another man when she got the chance, I figured. Which would mean that High-Low Jack wasn't within visiting distance that evening.

I went along kind of rational after that, trying to get a line on her. But I couldn't hold out. The bug had bit into me pretty deep, and I could see she was enjoying my company. Yes, sir, says I to myself, even if she is one of them girls who can care for more than one, right now, Phil Giles, you're the rat's silk leggings.

"If you haven't left town before Tim gets well, I'd love to take you to see Palm Cañon. It's a beautiful spot. We could ride over and back in a day—and I'd prepare a nice lunch," she said, looking at me in a shy, inviting way.

"In that case, I'll wait till—" I began, and stopped short.

For ten minutes I'd been listening to Tim's breathing. I could hear it coming through the open door of his bedroom. I got up from the table and walked in where the poor devil lay, and lit a match and looked at him. Then I untied the rope I'd strapped him down with and chucked it under the bed. He'd passed out. I'd heard him take his last breath while she was speaking. Pardner, you can't fight Old King Alcohol except on his own terms—am I right or wrong?

As I turned to go back in the kitchen, I met Annabelle at the door. The lamplight was shining full on my face, and she read in the look I gave her what I didn't know just how to tell her.

AFTER that, I couldn't have left that lonely dugout if I'd wanted to. That poor little thing lay crumpled on the floor alongside the cot, sobbing as if her heart would break. I couldn't have left her alone like that, and been human.

What she needed most was a woman's sympathy—a woman's breast to rest her head on. At that moment I thought what a comfort her mother would have been. It made me think of my own mother for the first time in some years, and I felt like a dirty scrub.

And the more I stood and watched that poor girl, grieving and grieving, so helpless and broken, the more I pitied her, and the sorer I got at myself because I couldn't do anything. At last I couldn't stand it any longer, so I dropped on one knee beside her, and started comforting her. That's a hard job, but somehow I seemed to manage it. A little later on I lifted her to her feet and led her out into the kitchen, holding her tenderly, like she was something clean and white that I was afraid of soiling.

She cried and cried, her head on my breast. I don't know but what she just might have wanted to imagine I was her mother. And I talked and talked to her, low and gentle as I could, and not knowing a word I said. What are you smiling about, pardner? You sure don't think I'd make love to her with her brother lying—Oh, you're wondering what High-Low Jack would have done if he'd come in just then and seen us? You've got a good imagination, and no mistake.

Anyhow, there we both stood; her sobbing broken-hearted on my chest; me with my arm around her, and stroking her beautiful brown hair with this hand. That's before it got crippled like you see it. Of course, I never expected an interruption, and as for visitors, why I hadn't even thought of such a thing. It was around ten o'clock and there was too much sorrow in that out-of-the-way little home to stop and think of anything.

So I wasn't paying attention to any other sound except Annabelle's weeping. At that, though the front door stood wide open, I don't believe I'd have heard that roadster come pussyfooting down off the mesa on its balloon tires, even if I'd been listening for it. It ran like oil.

The first I knew that somebody had arrived was when I looked up and saw him standing in the door. Yes, sir, High-Low Jack Lordham himself! I'd never met him, you'll remember, but from what Doc Lyman had told me, and from the way his eyes burned me up, I guessed right off the bat who that big silent stranger was.

Maybe for about a quarter of a minute we stared at one another. Alongside of him, I was little better than a hobo. He was togged up as if he'd just stepped out of the catalogue of a mail order house, shaved clean, and handsome as any man I've ever seen; and he looked like a big butter and egg galoot who usually got what he went after and never took no for an answer. But he was a slicker—you couldn't fool me on that breed.

Annabelle, her back to him, still sobbed on my breast, and I kept on holding her and stroking her hair. And when he found out that I was kind of tough myself and that he couldn't out-eye me, he took a fighting step into the kitchen, and stopped a pace or so away from us.

"Annabelle!" he ripped out like an oath, his face chalk-white. "Annabelle, what does this mean?"

She started as if he'd shot at her. I heard her gasp. She forgot to cry. She drew out of my arm slowly, shivering, and stood looking up at him, confused and frightened.

"Who is this fellow? What is he to you? Answer me, or by God, I'll—" he began furiously.

But, before he finished, I stepped in front of her.

"I'll answer that, pardner, any other place but here," I said, and I guess I looked as wicked as I felt. "There's been a death in this family. And if you don't behave yourself, I'm going to pitch you out on your head. You get that, don't you?"

Annabelle burst out crying again, violently. She caught my shirt in a wild grip, and I suspected she was holding to me for protection.

High-Low Jack's face hadn't changed any. He didn't speak, but he bored me through and through with his eyes for a space. Then he walked quickly past us into the other room to satisfy himself I wasn't lying, I judged.

"You needn't be scared of him," I said to Annabelle, turning and whispering in her ear. "I'm not going to let him trouble you. That's settled!"

Pretty soon he came back into the kitchen. You'd have thought he owned the place the way he acted. He halted opposite me, legs spread, his chest thrown out, and took a cigaret from a gold case and lit it. It was all I could do to keep from flattening it against his teeth!

"Well, it's too bad, Annabelle, but there's hardly any need of carrying on so. Buck up. It's not as if it was unexpected!"

I just can't say it the way he did. It was as if he had said, for instance: "The horse was no good, nohow. It's a good thing it died natural, than for you to have had to shoot it."

Annabelle didn't even answer him. As for me, I stood and never took my eyes off his face. Right then I was wishing he'd start getting rough, that he'd try plaguing her. But he didn't. He had an ace in the hole, and when he played it—say, friend, it knocked me for a row of hand-painted dumb-bells!

Seeing that Annabelle didn't care to notice him, and that more than likely it was on account of me, he went wild with rage. He glared at me as though he would have liked to kill me, then he grinned about as horrible as I've ever seen a man do.

"I'm sorry, Annabelle, but I hold several of Tim's notes—a matter of a thousand dollars—which I'll present for payment tomorrow," he said in a voice that cut like a knife. Oh, he was nasty, I can tell you!

"I reckon Miss Fennimore will see that you get what's due you, mister. But, except she says so—don't come around here looking for money, until after *it's* all over. *Sabe?*" I shot at him, just like that.

He chuckled.

"Is that a suggestion or a threat?"

"Take it either way you want," I said quickly.

All I knew at the time was that Annabelle was still clinging to me, trembling, trying to choke back her sobs to listen.

"I'll do that, cowboy," he sneered, "and when I come, I'll bring a deputy sheriff or the constable with me. How do you like that?"

The look he bent on me as he said this gave me a jolt, it was so cunning. But I didn't let him see it.

"Bring along a herd of them if you're coming in the morning, because you're sure going to need help. Now, except you're a bigger skunk than what I already know you are, you'll shut up and get out!"

He puffed his cigaret a moment, then he turned and walked for the door. Reaching it, he stopped and pinned his fiery eyes on me again.

"I just want to say, cowboy," he said, speaking between his teeth, "that if you know what's good for you, you'll climb on your horse and dig out of the country. Didn't I see in the papers where a herder shot another man over a girl, in the Green Range, last week, and escaped—heading this way? At a dance, wasn't it? Annabelle, your cowpuncher friend is wanted for murder. Ask him! He dassen't deny it!"

That was the ace in the hole he held, that I mentioned a while back. Annabelle gasped, and I felt her let go my shirt as if it was a snake.

He didn't wait for an answer. With a laugh, he sprang out of the door, and the next moment I heard his machine go chugging up the road out of the Hollow.

TAKE it from me, I was hard hit! For some seconds, I stood motionless, paralyzed, staring helplessly at the open door. I couldn't believe my ears. It didn't seem possible that I could be found out that quick. I'd forgotten all about the newspapers; hadn't even stopped to think that the Archibald Gulchers had brains enough to read! And, here I'd been taking things easy, believing I was safe like a big rummy.

You see, I was so badly flustered at the time over that cussed card-sharp's accusation that I never stopped to figure that, being jealous of the stand-in I appeared to have with Annabelle he'd simply made a wild guess, knowing that if he branded me a murderer, she'd more than likely drop me like a dirty deuce. I was a stranger, a common herder, and maybe I did look somewhat suspicious. And he had guessed right, and knew it. Leave it to him to rush off and tell the officers.

I came to, finally. The dugout was still as death. Annabelle had quit crying. I looked around and found her standing against the wall by the stove. Her face was pale, and she was holding her hands and staring at me, as if she was about ready to scream any minute.

I saw, plain as day, that I wasn't wanted around there any longer. There was a "Please go away!" look in those pretty blue eyes of hers that hurt me worse than if she'd cut loose and called me names.

So I just walked over and picked up my hat to go. On my way out, I halted at the table. And to think I'd tried to quit eating with my knife! I laid down a five dollar bill alongside of my plate, to pay for myself and horse. And just as I was about to thank her and say good-by——

"It's a lie!" she burst out, with a wild sob. She sprang across the floor to my side, and grabbed my hand and looked at me in a way that made me wish to God I'd let that tramp buckaroo kiss that other girl. "I—I can't believe it! I won't believe it, Phil! He lied! He lied! You're not that kind of a man——"

That melted me. The faith of that heartbroken little thing—and I'd only known her a few hours, and done next to nothing for her, except show her a mite of sympathy! On top of all her sorrow and suffering, she had time to think of me.

I went all to pieces, and caught her in my arms, and felt as wretched as a man who's positive he'll never live to be happy.

"You've got to believe it, Annabelle. It's true," I whispered, in a shaky voice. Oh, I trusted her, pal. You can always trust the woman who loves you with your life!

"True—Phil?" she gasped. She looked at me again, but there was a different expression in her eyes, now. Horror, yes, but such a lot of longing and fear—and I could see, creeping across her lovely face like a shadow, a sort of reckless determination that I remembered was the way my old mother looked when my dad was set on giving me a beating, which he never got to do, thanks to her.

Now, I'll agree with you that it might not have been according to Hoyle for me to give Annabelle an account, at that particular time, of why I'd killed that tough leather-leg. There was the awful shock of her brother's death without me pestering her with my affairs. But things hadn't been going according to Hoyle to start with; and besides she insisted on my telling her everything. That's the kind of little trouble-shooter she was! And I did, even to my right name—Giles, instead of Stone.

And, after I'd got through, she looked me straight in the eyes and asked me only one question, and that was: Did I love that other girl? And that gave me a chance to inquire about that high-stepping card-sharp, High-Low Jack.

It appeared that he'd been trying to win her for some time. He'd run her ragged with his attention, buying her presents and reeling off love by the yard to her every minute he got her alone. Then, when he saw he couldn't get her that way, he'd started working on her brother; loaned him money, and won him over. And pretty soon Tim began pulling for his tin-horn friend, and raising hell generally with her when he wasn't sick from overwork. (I didn't let on that it was the overwork that comes in bottles that killed him.)

We stood there in the kitchen, talking. Now and then she'd bust out crying. But all the time, she was cuddled up close t me, a helpless, trusting little thing. My heart was pounding away like a pile-driver, and yet the thought kept sinking deeper and deeper into my brain that this business couldn't last. I'd have to leave her. Presently, it'd be too late. Sheriffs have a cussed way of popping up quicker than you expect, particularly if there's a reward in it for them.

Gee, it was tough to give Annabelle up! I'd won and lost her just like that. I'd have to give her up when she needed me most—to this skunk who used cologne in his bath water! Except I could sneak back in the next day or so, at night, after the funeral, and— The more I thought of that helpless little thing staying alone in that lonely hollow, and High-Low Jack so wild over her, I just got desperate enough to do anything! And to make it worse she told me she'd have to let him take that pretty oasis to pay up the thousand dollars in notes he held against Tim.

That crushed me, and again it didn't. In the first place, I just got sick thinking what would become of her, turned out of her home. High-Low could never win her, even if he let her keep it, she told me. But on the other hand, I felt that I could steal away with her some night—we'd both b without a place to go—and we could jump over into Mexico, maybe, and get married and there were lots of sunny days ahead of us to look forward to.

But, pal, leave it to a woman's intuition if you want to play in luck. Here, I was between hell and high water, trying to figure out what I'd better do, and having few precious moments to do it in if wanted to make my getaway, when Annabelle suddenly said:

"Phil, I'm going on into town. Jack Lordham wasn't sure when he accused you. Somehow I feel he only did it just to b hateful. I'll find out from Constable Watts. I must go, dear, anyhow. Don't—don't you understand?" She turned and looked through her tears toward the little room where her dead brother lay.

Five minutes afterward, I blew out the light and shut the door, and walked with her up the road out of the hollow. Th ight was blue black, it was so dark. There asn't a sound. A few lights on the mesa the north were the only evidence that rchibald Gulch, the dirtiest burg on the ohave, was still squatting out there.

We kissed one another, as if we were ying good-by forever.

"Honey," I whispered to her, kind of l-in, "if I'm not here when you come back, ou'll know I just had to get out. But I'll back around midnight tomorrow."

I stood and watched her until she disppeared in the darkness, then I went ck down and saddled up, and rode to the p of the mesa again, and waited there stening, all ready to sling off into the ight. And I waited, and waited, and ited. But nobody came, not even An- belle.

AT FIRST, I naturally figured she had a lot to attend to. She was going to see about the funeral prepara- ons, and then there was Constable Watts talk to, and it might have been that she s trying to get a woman friend to stay ernight with her. I couldn't expect her just think of me on an occasion like is. And, all the time, I was wondering hy the officers hadn't come after me.

But after I'd waited two hours, and she dn't showed up I knew as well as if ebody'd told me that something had ppened to her.

Man, talk about wild! I was a mad- an. I never thought a fellow could ange as sudden as I had since coming to chibald Gulch, not more than eight urs before. I had arrived tickled pink t I'd got away from the curse of my e—women. And now here I was des- rate enough to commit murder again another. Yes, sir, you guessed it! It s love, this time. Annabelle had tied heart in a bow-knot and was wearing right over her own. And if you've ever en in love, pardner, you know best what u'd have done if you'd been thinking High-Low Jack like I was.

Crazy-reckless, I jabbed the spurs into bronc and tore across the mesa for n. I was there in jig-time, and swung o the main street. Pulling my horse n to a walk, I rode along till I came Doc Lyman's saloon. I've already told how dead the town was. But Lyman a full house that night.

I stepped to one side of the open door, looked my guns over by the light shining through the windows, and waited. I intended asking the first man who came out if High-Low Jack was inside, and if he was I figured on going in after him.

But my plan got knocked in the head, and it was just as well it did. I heard steps approaching from up the street, and who should it be but Doc Lyman. I got out of the saddle and halted him.

"Doc, have you seen Miss Fennimore this evening?" I asked him.

He squinted at me, like he was trying to place me—I guess I looked pretty fierce —then he chuckled right in my face. The old son of a gun!

"Annabelle is at the hotel, suffering from shock."

"Shock?" I gasped out. "What from? Did that damned card-shark——"

"She fainted over in the constable's office," he broke in, watching me like a fox. "I was just going to the Hollow to look after poor Tim's remains," he added slowly; then, he laughed again. "You're Phil Giles, ain't you? Well Constable Watts is looking for you, for killing a man over in the Green Range. Annabelle told him where you were, and he just now started over after you."

"You've got your dope mixed, pard," I said, cold as ice. "My name's Stone."

"Oh, it's nothing to me what it is—I'm only telling you," he grinned. "But if you want to see Annabelle, now's your chance. She's worrying considerable about you. You'd better hurry while the constable is away."

He looked back as he entered the saloon, and gave me the horse laugh.

There was only one hotel in Archibald Gulch, and I jumped on my horse and rode down the street till I found it. I was in an awful sweat, let me tell you. The constable was looking for me! Annabelle had told him where I was! She had fainted—maybe he had mistreated her to make her talk? If I was desperate before, I was looney now. I'd have faced a whole regiment of sheriffs and constables and their wives and families and thought nothing of it.

Annabelle was resting in the parlor, the hotel clerk said, and I walked to the door, knocked and threw it open.

There she lay, under a quilt on the sofa.

Her pretty face was pale and sort of drawn. But her eyes lighted up when she saw me. I started into the room, then I stopped short. There were two other people with her, one of them a woman. But I didn't notice her. I looked at the man. He wore a flashing tin-buzzer on his vest. Doc Lyman had run me into a trap. I stood face to face with Constable Watts.

"Phil! Phil! I'm so glad you came. Doctor Lyman just left to bring you," cried Annabelle. She held out her hand to me, and began to cry.

I looked at the constable. He was eying me in a funny way. I didn't know what to think, so I went over and took a seat on the edge of the sofa, and caught Annabelle's hand, and felt as miserable as I ever did in all my life. I knew that if they didn't hang me I'd rot in the penitentiary, anyway.

"I had to come to—to find out what kept you, Annabelle," I said, like a fellow too sick to talk.

"Oh, you poor dear boy!" she sobbed. Then she smiled. "I'm—I'm so happy for your sake. I fainted when—when Constable Watts told me. Look, Phil! Read that, honey!" digging up a sheriff's circular from somewhere and holding it before me.

I read, as if I was seeing it through a mist:

$1,000 REWARD
for
"Hairtrigger" Ted Manning
Notorious Bandit
DEAD OR ALIVE

And in the picture that snarled up at me as though it was dying to assassinate me, I recognized the face of that stra buckaroo who had insisted on kissing t other girl, that I'd insisted he shouldn't and that he didn't.

That's all, except that Annabelle a me— What's that?

Oh, sure enough, friend! I started o to tell you how I got shot through t hand, didn't I?

Well, you see: soon as I'd collected t reward, I gave it to Annabelle and s gathered in Tim's notes from High-Lo Jack, and saved Fennimore Hollow fro passing out of the family. High-Low w a good loser. He saw I'd beaten his tim so he shook hands and give us his blessi That's a fact!

The night before the wedding, I kiss Annabelle and started off to the ho where I was stopping. It was about elev o'clock and a fierce wind storm was swee ing the mesa. Just as I got out of t Hollow and began bucking the gale, he down, why— Well, sir, I'm pretty cert that High-Low must have lost his wa somehow, in that storm, and figuring I w a holdup, why he just shot at me witho thinking. At least, that's what I thoug *he* was when I shot back. It was a te rible mistake for him to make, because—

Where's Archibald Gulch? Why, you' in it, stranger, and looking down the mai street this minute. Soon as the railro came, they changed the name to the hig toned one it's got, Utopia; hauled away t tin cans and dirt, and gave it a coat paint. It ain't the dirtiest town on t Mohave, now. It might be the ne dirtiest, though.

Say, come on down to Fennimore Ho low with me and have dinner. I wa you to meet Annabelle and the rest of

The CODE *of The* KILLER

By KENNETH ROGERS

THE most ancient heritage of man is the bearing of arms. Civilization was born when he found that a stone tied securely to a stick gave him advantage over his enemies. He ceased thereafter to slink through the leafy shadows of the forest, and took to the hunt. He abandoned the cultivation of cunning, and discovered courage. He became man.

The killer existed before weapons were made. He would continue to exist if weapons were destroyed. He lives, not by his weapon, but by the skill he acquires in its use. And where dexterity in arms is a common virtue, the killer is much less audacious in the practice of his profession.

The glorified murderer of the Old West is an exaggerated figure. Gun fights there were, and violent deaths. But the victims were largely of the killer breed themselves. They had courted their fate. They were asking for it, and got it.

The honest man, the rancher, prospector, miner or lumber man, enjoyed a manner of freedom which belongs to a vanished age. He carried a gun, most likely a walnut handled, .45 caliber, single action Colt, and he kept it well oiled. Rarely did he use it, but it was there, present and ready for action. It was a deterrent to those who would impose on him in matters of courtesy or honor or the sacredness of personal property. His rights were recognized by his fellows.

There were dishonest men and cruel men, but no sneak thieves. The tradition of gallantry which surrounds the old-time outlaw is understandable. He knew what he was up against. He cast his life in the balance, and did not whine if it was forfeit. The peace officer who arrested him, and subsequently either shot or hanged him, did not insult him with verbal abuse. A city traffic cop has more to say and infinitely less to do than any average deputy sheriff of the Old West.

The other day I was talking to a detective. He said: "I know at least a dozen guys walking around this city who have bumped off other guys. I know they're killers, and they know I know it. But they're not in the bag; they're perfectly safe. And they know that too."

Why was this, I asked.

"Nobody has nerve enough to testify. They're afraid of getting bumped off themselves. I couldn't get a witness. Why, one of them walked into a crowded restaurant, stopped at a table, and emptied his gun into some friend of his sitting there. Then he walked out. And he's safe as a baby."

There was a day, not so long before this era of peace and security, when some friend or relative of the murdered man would have ended the career of the killer with all possible despatch. He would have employed a shotgun if necessary. And his neighbors, impaneled in a jury, after considering the justice of the affair, would presently have freed him. In time they might even have elected him sheriff for his demonstrated spirit of public service.

A bandit will enter a store nowadays, calmly demand the contents of the cash register, and depart without haste. Clerks have learned to submit, even when a gun is not in evidence. They know how surely a gun will be in evidence if they resist.

Auto drivers, innocently stopping on a highway to offer a lift to someone, are ordered from the wheel and left standing by the roadside while the car drives away. They have learned to refrain even from expressing their opinions of the outrage.

The old day is gone. No more do men carry weapons and use them as they see fit. No longer do they offer to their fellow men, and expect from them in return, courtesy and consideration and respect. The Code has become the Law.

The Law . . . well, consider City Marshal Ben Tilghman of Cromwell, Oklahoma. Ben was the Law, and a mighty efficient Law, for most of his lifetime. In his day he faced the Doolans, the Daltons and others of the hardest gangs that ever operated anywhere. He died just a couple of years ago. He was shot and killed by a drunken prohibition agent whom he tried to arrest for disturbing the peace.

When Law meets Law, the common man takes to the hills.

Concluding

The Roaring Towns

A Novel of the Days When the Somber Black Hills Became a Land of Blood and Gold

By HUGH PENDEXTER

Preceding events briefly retold

In the year 1867 Lee Darby, a veteran of the Confederate Army, comes to Cheyenne, intent upon making his fortune. The frontier is a scene of wild disorders due to the approach of the Union Pacific Railroad.

In this wildest of the roaring railroad towns Darby has fallen in with Fevernager, an old plainsman, and Baltimore, his partner. The Indians had killed Baltimore's parents when he was an infant; and, adopting him, had raised him to manhood more Indian than white in mind and habit. Fevernager invites Darby to join him in the business of hunting buffalo to supply the railroad towns with meat. He hesitates, wishing to engage in something that will yield larger returns.

Darby also meets Allan Gorl, an Eastern capitalist who seeks adventure and new fortunes on the frontier. Darby feels that together he and Gorl could reap big profits. But Gorl, although a business genius, wastes his time and money in drinking and gambling. Gorl himself realizes that it is only his wealth that buys him immunity from the vicious elements of Cheyenne. Gorl consorts with Dollie, a Spanish dance-hall girl, and is amused at her conflicting impulses of affection and avarice.

Chief of the bad element of Cheyenne is Elder Keen, an apostate Mormon, shrewd and quiet, but the most deadly of gun-fighters. Among his satellites are Jack Hays, a noisy braggart, and Whisky Frank, a reputed killer. There is bad blood between Keen's killers, and Fevernager, Baltimore and Darby, but they have not fought.

One evening as Gorl and Darby are entering a dance hall they hear a shot. Rushing in, they find that Whisky Frank has mortally wounded an old prospector named Strawberry Sam, who was so indiscreet as to display a fat pouch of gold. Keen had been attempting, without success, to worm out of Sam the location of his strike. Now as Sam is dying he whispers to Darby, so that none of the killers can hear, the secret that will set the frontier afire, the secret that Darby is to carry to Fevernager, Sam's friend—that "The Black Hills are lousy with gold."

Darby eludes Keen and rides out onto the plains to Fevernager's camp. He gives Sam's last message to the old plainsman but neither he nor Baltimore are eager for gold. Nor will they assist Darby to find the rich strike, believing that a search for it will end in tragedy. So Darby reluctantly settles down to the business of killing and preparing buffalo for the market.

Darby becomes restless and rides into Cheyenne. He has a notion that he can persuade Gorl to organize a gold-seeking expedition to the Black Hills. His hopes are blasted when he meets the Spanish girl and hears that Elder Keen has taken Gorl off to his lair in the hills. The girl begs Darby to rescue Gorl. She fears that Keen will get him to sign away all his wealth, and then kill him. Darby consents to go.

Darby reaches Keen's lair, and knowing that the gun-fighter will never kill him while he holds Strawberry Sam's secret, boldly demands that Gorl be allowed to return in safety to Cheyenne. Just as Keen is about to gain the upper hand

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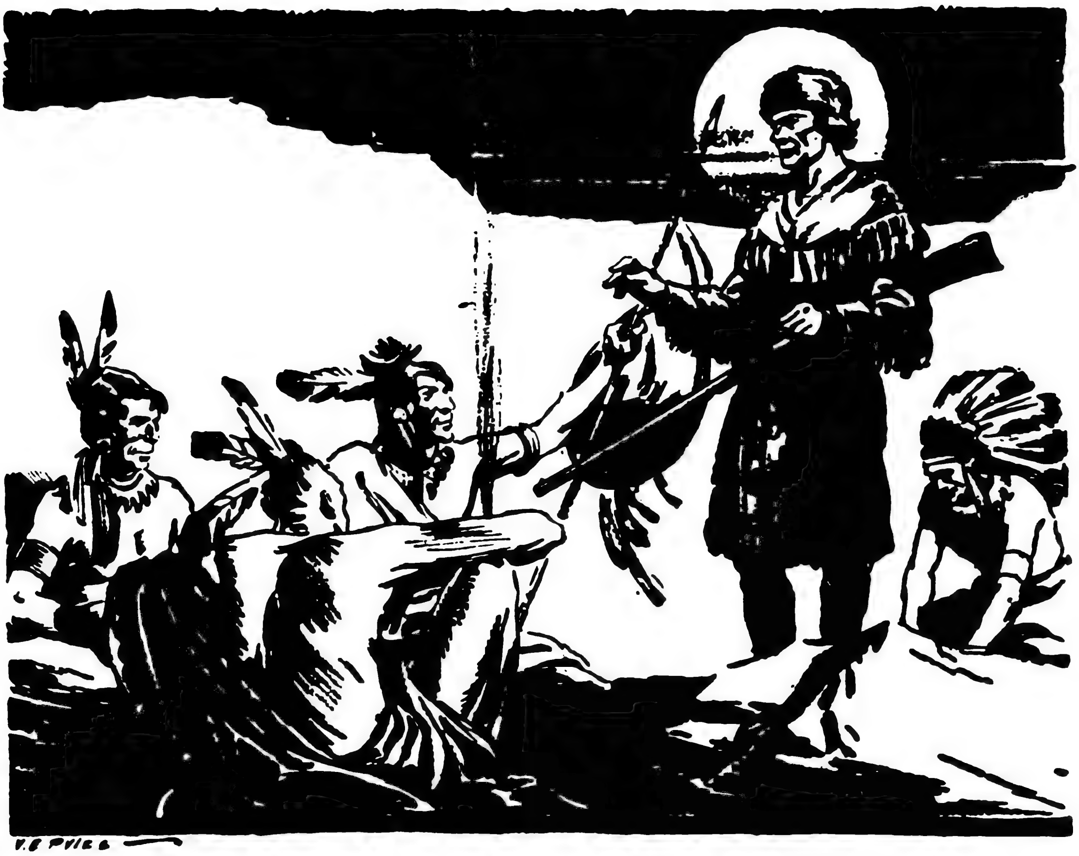


in this tilt, a squad of soldiers rides up and Gorl and Darby are released.

Disgusted with Gorl, Darby returns to Fevernager's camp. He finds that the Thunder Birds of the Indians have appeared to Baltimore in a dream and told him that he would kill a man "who would be painted red and standing in water." Baltimore rides away into the hills to perform the rites of the *Heyoka Kaga*. Darby and Fevernager go to Cheyenne to pass the winter and await Baltimore's return in the spring.

Gorl is again friendly with Keen. Failing in several honest attempts to regain his wasted fortune, the Easterner joins Keen in shady money-making schemes.

Darby and Fevernager meet a half-breed named Kensler. He shows them gold nuggets he has found in the Black Hills. They buy the gold and caution the breed to remain silent. Fevernager then gladdens Darby by telling him that in the spring, when Baltimore returns, the three will seek gold in the Black Hills.

Law and order finally come to Cheyenne. A vigilance committee is organized. Its first action is to run the badmen out of town. Gorl and Keen are among those who are forced to flee this rude justice. They join other lawbreakers in Laramie City, the most recent of the roaring railroad towns.

In the meantime Darby has taken a job with the U. P. as watchman. He is called to Laramie City. There he finds Gorl more firmly in the clutches of Keen. Darby feels sorry for Gorl but can do nothing to help him.

Shortly after his return to Cheyenne Darby is again summoned to Laramie City. An agent of the U. P. has been murdered and Darby is given the task of bringing the fugitives to justice. Keen did the killing with the assistance of Gorl. Both men have fled to the hills.

Darby sets out in pursuit, displeased with his job for he knows that Gorl is a blunderer rather than a wrongdoer. Darby finds Keen and kills him in a gun battle. He makes a prisoner of Gorl who has been wounded by the treacherous Keen. On the way back to Laramie City Darby decides to free Gorl who is innocent of any real crime. Darby tells the Easterner that he will take him along to the Black Hills and give him a last chance to retrieve his honor and his fortune.

Darby, Fevernager, Baltimore and Gorl set out for the Black Hills and its treasure of gold. They are warned along the way that it is dangerous to go into the Indian country. They meet the breed, Kensler, who looks with a suspicious eye at their outfit.

Without mishap the four reach the gold fields in the heart of the Indian country. Baltimore tells his companions that it means death if the Indians discover them panning gold in this "medicine," or sacred country. Having but indifferent success washing for gold, Baltimore tells his friends that he knows of a cache of gold left by a party of whites who had been massacred some years before. He goes alone to bring back this treasure.

While Baltimore is gone the camp is surrounded by a band of Indians. The three white men find themselves looking into the muzzles of hostile rifles.

CHAPTER X

PRISONERS OF THE GODS

THE three men were quickly deprived of their weapons; the plainsman warning them to make no resistance. Then their hands were tied behind their backs, their feet secured, and they were thrown to the ground. Their captors opened all the supplies and set about preparing a meal. The band was in haste to be traveling and evidently had not eaten for hours. The horses, too, when brought in from the growth above the camp, showed the need of rest and grass.

A man with his face red from his eyes to his neck was the only one who was painted. His robe of wildcat skins, an article most highly valued by the Shoshoni, told of a successful encounter with some member of that tribe. Gorl had seen breeds in the railroad towns and blanketed Indians spying on the construction crews in the upper valley of the Platte. Now he had an intimate view of those who avoided contact with the white man's civilization. He was stunned by the unexpected appearance of the red men. He dully noted one man lacked a thumb and wore bear's claws around his neck. He saw another open his round rawhide box, or parfleche, and inspect a handsome war bonnet of feathers, further decorated by two short horns. But he did not know this possession distinguished the owner as a very brave man, and one who had counted many coups. One man was a dandy, and wore several rows of the milk teeth of the elk across his shirt, enough to make a squaw's dress worth several hundred dollars. They all looked alike to Gorl, and, only in a lesser degree, to Darby.

To Fevernager each man was as individualistic as a white man among whites. He mechanically appraised the value of the elk teeth shirt, and recognized the man examining the war bonnet as a chief prominent at Fort Phil Kearney. The man with the bear's claws doubtless had lost his thumb in a fight with a bear. The robe of wildcat skins turned his thoughts for a moment to the Shoshoni, and he remembered their great veneration for the chickadee, who discovered the world, and how the Great Medicine, or Mystery, made the trees behave when his red children went to gather wood, and stopped the rivers from dragging under and drowning those who went for water. Darby stared hopelessly on the scene, one thought running through his head: he had survived the War to die at the hands of savages. Only one man wore no decorations and he was the famous Red Cloud. His hair was plaited and adorned with several rosettes of hammered silver. He was armed with two Colt's revolvers and a Spencer rifle. The latter carried seven shots and was loaded through a trap in the butt. This was an item that Darby noticed, as he knew the Blakeslee tin tube of seven cartridges was in use during the last two years of the war, although not patented until 1865. Every man in the band had one or more revolvers, or a rifle, in addition to his bow and arrows.

All supplies not to be taken away were dumped into the creek as the captors were in too great haste to be held back by the plodding burros. The lean-to was fired and the rocker thrown into the flames. The man with the wildcat robe told Fevernager, "We can find gold in your blood. We shall work slow until we find it."

"The medicine in my blood will make you dry up and turn to stone," promptly replied the plainsman in the language of the Teton Dakota.

Neither Darby nor Gorl had understood any of this. Fevernager twisted his head to gaze at Red Cloud, who stood apart and had not aided in destroying the camp, and called out, "This is very bad, Makhpia-sha. They tie a man who has presented the pipe to the buffalo's head. They tie the man who has called them *Kola*, and slept in their lodges."

Red Cloud lowered at him and answered, "It was bad when the old man ran away to live with white men. It was very bad when he brought white men to Wakantanka's resting place to steal gold."

"We were led here by a man who calls you father. A *heyoka* dream told him to bring us here. The dream told him we would not be hurt," insisted the plainsman, his voice loud that all might hear.

"Did the dream tell him his white brothers should steal gold?" replied Red Cloud. Without waiting to be answered he continued, "Makhpia-sha sees no man who has called him father. He sees a man who looks like a man who called him brother. That was long ago. Makhpia-sha does not lead these men."

"Who does lead them?" asked the plainsman.

For an answer Red Cloud turned his head to look at a man whose saddle-cloth was decorated in red and black with some of the details of the Fetterman massacre. Fevernager did not recognize him at once, although convinced he had met him. He asked Red Cloud:

"Will his medicine grow weak if his name is called?"

"They say Black Shield, chief of the Bad Face band, leads these men," slowly replied Red Cloud. "He is a very brave man. He has carried the pipe on four big paths. Makhpia-sha met him two sleeps ago. Makhpia-sha leaves him and rides on to the White after this medicine place is left behind." That there might be no misunderstanding of his status Red Cloud added, "The white men are prisoners of Black Shield."

Fevernager was deeply disappointed. He had hoped he was Red Cloud's prisoner. He studied his captor more carefully, but could not place him. As his gaze passed on and dwelt on the face of each warrior in turn he recognized a man he had met near the mouth of the Moreau, whose people, the Hunkpapa Dakota, were denounced by General Warren in 1855 for being the most dreaded of all the Dakotas along the Missouri river. They ranged from the Cheyenne to the Yellowstone and repeatedly had refused Government annuities, frankly stating they preferred freedom to scalp and kill white men. Some tribes took annuities with one hand and killed with the other. The Hunkpapa were active at Fort Phil Kearney and boasted of Sitting Bull as their leader and adviser. There was a crumb of comfort in knowing the Bad Face band were Oglala. Yet the plainsman smiled in glad recognition and called out:

"My eyes are glad to see an old friend. They see Si-Tanka (Big Foot). It is good to see him in the *Mato Tipi* country."

Big Foot gave the prisoner a scowling glance and turned his back. Black Shield urged his men to place the prisoners on horses and tie their ankles.

In a hoarse voice Darby asked, "What comes next?"

"Death's peekin 'round th' next corner, but we ain't dead yet. Don't talk," replied the plainsman.

Rough hands were laid on the three men and they were hoisted on horses and rawhide thongs were quickly passed from ankle to ankle under the horse's belly. Gorl spoke for the first time. In a whisper he told the Southerner, "This is the end."

Fevernager pitied him. Not yet had the Easterner been able to visualize how death would come. While his ankles were being tied he turned to Red Cloud, now mounted and directly behind him, and said, "A friend calls Makhpia-sha by name. What has the friend done to make the greatest of all the Oglalas stop his ears?"

RED CLOUD, then forty-six years old and the most distinguished of a very brave people, had attained his prominence by forcefulness and unbounded courage. He had refused to sign treaties other leaders had been induced to sign. He was inexorably opposed to the military posts on the Montana road, the presence of which, he insisted, vitiated the usefulness of the hunting grounds as stipulated in the peace commission's treaty. Of what advantage was the allotment of all the land from the Cheyenne to the Big Horns as a red hunting ground if white roads were allowed to crisscross it with endless freight trains? As for any white trespass in the Black Hills and the finding of gold, he would as soon consent to thrusting fire into a barrel of powder on which he was seated.

From the stern and unrelenting expression of the chief's face Fevernager could have no suspicion of the opposed desires filling the red mind. The chief had known and liked the old plainsman for many years; he was bitterly hostile to any white man who entered the Black Hills. Therefore, he found himself wishing to save while believing he should kill. His forefathers were distinguished for their unswerving loyalty to the red race. He had accepted the plainsman as one who had left his people to live and think like a Dakota. He regretted that Black Shield's trap should include the old man. As for the other two he dismissed them from his mind as being as good as dead, and as deserving death.

He stared at Fevernager thoughtfully, recalling the old friendship, and there was a shadow over his heart as he told him, "There was a buffalo robe for the white man in our village. When white people laughed if he were hungry and could not sleep warm, the Oglalas took him in. He told our young men his heart was filled with Dakota blood. He said he wanted to live in our tipis. He said the iron horse was bad and would kill old things. Now he comes to get the yellow rock white men call gold. He brings white men with him to a medicine place. If Black Shield had not caught him he would go back to the Platte, the river where Makhpia-sha was born, and he would tell many white men gold is here in the *Mato Tipi* country. From here to the Platte the land would be covered with white men, just as happened when gold was found in Colorado and Montana. White men do not take the gold and go back where they came from. They build wooden villages, they tear up the land and make more roads.

"What can be done with a man who makes Wakinyan (the thunder god) angry?" And he raised a hand for silence as through a notch in the hills came the dull, vibrating rumble of thunder.

But Fevernager did not show he was nonplused by the justice in the chief's words. He replied, "*Kola,* a young man's dream, not gold, sent the white men here. That young man lived many winters with the Dakotas. He was taken when his people were killed in South Pass. In a dream the Horsemen in the Clouds told him to come here. In the winter he went back to the Dakotas and with their help went through the *Heyoka Kaga.*"

"The Horsemen did not tell the white men to come here and hunt for gold," sternly replied Red Cloud. "The dream did not tell Medicine Calf to bring three white men with him."

"The dream told him the white men should ride back to the Platte."

"The dream told Medicine Calf three men should ride from the hills," corrected Makhpia-sha. "The dream was talked about in Makhpia-sha's village last winter. The dream could not lie. Three men now ride from the hills. If the dream had said three white men ride back to the Platte it meant they would ride back dead men."

"A thunder dream would not send three dead men riding," insisted the plainsman.

"Did the dream name the three men?" countered Red Cloud. "Medicine Calf is in the hills, you tell us. That makes four men. Then one must die. Did the dream name that man?"

"Three white men were meant," insisted Fevernager, but inwardly worried over the new twist given to the dream. "The Horsemen look on Medicine Calf as a Dakota."

Black Shield, who had been an interested listener, waited a proper length of time for Red Cloud to reply, and as the chief remained silent, the Shield demanded, "Where is Medicine Calf? Why did he leave the white men?"

"He went away to talk with his medicine. He will be back soon," answered the plainsman. Now he was seized by the fear of Baltimore's return with a pack of gold from the dead Mormons' cache.

The thunder increased in volume and sounded like the bellowing of gigantic buffalo bulls. The Indians were impatient to be off, and there was fear in their furtive glances. The Thunderers when angry and casting their spears did not respect the color of a man's skin. Perhaps they were blind to all but the Unktehi, their ancient foes. The fact remained Dakotas had been killed in the hills, even a *heyoka* man. The dark bulk of thunder clouds pushing above the sky rim was lighted by the flight of a spear.

"The thunder beings open their eyes," muttered the man with wildcat robe.

Black Shield quickly formed the cavalcade, taking the head of the line. Red Cloud came last, riding behind Fevernager, and beside each prisoner rode a warrior. The horses, as if sensing danger, moved briskly down the lodge-pole trail. Fevernager nursed the hope that Red Cloud would help him and his companions, but there was no logic in the thought. The old plainsman hinted at his state of mind when he told Darby, riding ahead of him:

"Looks powerful bad. Most bodacious fix I've been in since th' last one. At the best it seems one of us must cash in our checks. I'd feel a heap better if the Shield wasn't leader of this outfit."

"If the other's such a great man why isn't he boss here?" asked the Southerner.

"He's the leader of the Oglala people. That don't mean he can dip his fingers into another man's kettle. He happens to be travelin' along with this outfit."

"How did they know we were here?" asked Darby.

His guard struck him over the mouth,

bringing blood. Fevernager called out over his shoulder, "Did Makhpia-sha see us here in a dream?"

"The young man the whites call Kensler told Black Shield's band you were coming here. Do not talk or they will strike you."

"The man who strikes me will die before the first snow," loudly warned the plainsman. His guard stared at him murderously and drew back his arm, then let his hand drop limply.

THE Horsemen now were riding high from the north and their thundering hoofs were deafening at times. A heavy rain overtook the file of men and blotted from view the growth pricking the sky line. Through the misty background the spears and arrows were repeatedly seen flashing into the timber, seeking out the Unktehi, the water and under-earth gods and their subordinates. Among the latter was the grandfather of all rattlesnakes, and a beast resembling an ox with tail and horns touching the sky. Nor did the Horsemen always succeed in battle. The Unktehi exuded a mysterious influence from their bodies which overwhelmed the sky-riders at times. In the endless conflict men are often killed.

With guns in their fringed cases and with their robes and blankets draped over their heads the Indians pressed on. Black Shield set the pace, but the rain so blurred even the immediate foreground as to preclude any great haste. The celestial attack was now overhead and a great fear ran the length of the red line. Each brave fully understood the danger of tarrying in a *taku wakan tipi*, or dwelling place of the gods. Each Indian believed he had erred in pausing to eat at the creek. Had the white men had their hands free they could have bolted from the line and have stood an excellent chance of escaping.

Fevernager endeavored in vain to release his wrists from the rawhide thongs. Like his captors he was caught on the battlefield of the rulers of fire and water. The man with the red face, who once dreamed of the Thunderers, sang his medicine song in a quavering voice unheard by any. The protective words were muffled by his robe, by the rush of the rain, the re-echoing thunder, and by the noise of the wind.

Another man, who believed the Unktehi were getting the better of the battle, removed two yards of red cloth from his loins and cast it to the ground to gain favor. His belief in the pacificatory effect of this gift was weak, however, as he knew it should be buried three feet in the ground and immediately after a ghost-lodge would be raised. Yet it must have had some effect, or else the thunder-dreamer's song had penetrated the clamor, for the storm quickly passed away by the time the horses had traveled less than five miles from the creek.

Robes and blankets were removed as the sunshine returned. Fear departed. The guards glared greedily at their prisoners. The plainsman, having said all there was to be said for the present, made no attempt to talk with Red Cloud. His captors became more highly elated. They had escaped the wrath of the gods. Once they were through Red Cañon they would camp on the creek and take their time in killing the prisoners.

Suddenly Gorl caused something of consternation by bursting into wild laughter. The Indians cast startled glances at him, each wondering if he had gone *heyoka*.

"Hush!" commanded Darby.

"Hush!" yelled Gorl. "Our goose is cooked. What a finish! My God! Dollie will never know. She'll always believe I deserted her. She'll sing her '*Ora pro nobis*' for herself." He suddenly burst out into tears.

"Stop it!" fiercely commanded Darby. "You're not dead yet. To show weakness is the worst thing you can do."

For the second time he was struck across the mouth. No one attempted to correct Gorl. Fevernager told the Southerner, "If only one of us gits clear of this bodacious mess I reckon it'll be Gorl. He has that chance if he quits snivilin' an' keeps up laffin'. They'll think he's crazy. They won't torture a crazy man."

"I'll try to be brave when it comes my turn," answered Darby. Then glaring murderously at the man riding beside him he defied, "Damn your painted hide! Why don't you strike?"

The man quickly raised his hand, but Black Shield, looking back at the speaker, ordered that no more blows be struck. He added, "There will be time at Red Creek to see how brave these white men are. In this medicine place it is good to let the *wakan* things do the striking."

Fevernager rode with his chin on his chest. He was considering the irony of fate that was sending him to the torture in the late evening of life. He was now convinced each man's span was limited to the time it would require in making Red Cañon Creek. He was glad his friends could not realize the fearful horrors which would usher in a slow death. And yet he pitied them for their ignorance. He dreaded the awakening of their terrible realization. There was a chance for Gorl could he continue his mad raving and keep away from tears. But he doubted the man's ability to pretend insanity. Mad laughter might save him, but not mere fear, nor despair. He would either be judged *heyoka*, or weak by the Indians.

AS THEY rode on a sense of rude justice entered the old man's brooding. White men had sought gold in a place which was taboo. He, himself, had fully understood the risk attached to the venture. Through all the years he had been the wanderer there had been a place for him in some red lodge. True, at times in his long career, he had had running fights with various bands; but such encounters had been affairs of honor and did not place a man beyond the pale of ultimate friendship. But this quest for gold raised the offense to a vastly higher plane. It was a blow to the entire Dakota nation, in addition to being an affront to the spirit guardians of the hills. Every tribe living, or hunting, north of the Platte was keenly dreading the time when the white race should swarm across that country; even as the whites had swarmed up the old Oregon road, and up the Platte and the Smoky Hill routes to Colorado. No Plains tribe now that had not learned the woful lesson of the destruction sure to follow an influx of whites. Wise red leaders long since had told their people that the last stand to save their hunting would be made north of the Platte and between the Missouri and the Big Horns.

Sitting Bull, the Hunkpapa Teton, was acquiring much influence beyond his own people. His reputation as a medicine man already was considerable and he became widely known by his raid on Fort Buford in 1866. Along with Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, and other leaders he had warned through many council smokes that the red nations soon must rally for a final war with the whites. The Montana road and its army posts, and the tremendous freighting to the northern gold camps, had taught the Central Plains tribe a lasting lesson. Fully appreciating the red state of mind, Fevernager knew a man must be as *waken* as *Mato tipi wapiya*, the grizzly bear doctor, to escape a horrible death once he was caught prospecting in the Black Hills. He never would have accepted the risk if not for young Baltimore's dream and a genuine desire to see Darby and, in a lesser degree, Gorl prosper.

"Keep laffin', Gorl," he called out. "Yer only chance."

Red Cloud sternly commanded, "Where is the young man, Medicine Calf, you say brought you here?"

"He rode away to make a new medicine, or renew an old."

"When is he coming back?"

"We do not know. After he has finished his medicine."

"But why did he bring you here? Why did he let you find gold? He does not want gold," persisted Red Cloud.

"He had a dream. It told him to lead us where you found us."

"That is for a crooked tongue to say," coldly said Red Cloud. "It is a foolish talk. Medicine Calf would not bring you north with a box to wash gold in. He would not leave you alone to find gold."

"He had a dream and brought us north to these hills. The Thunderers hear me say it," stoutly retorted the old plainsman. "The Flying One really hears me. The Horse hears me."

The plainsman repeated insistence that young Baltimore's Thunderbird dream was responsible for the white men's presence in the hills could no longer be derided. He had lived long with red men and was imbued with many of their superstitious beliefs. Now he invited inevitable death if his words were false. Either a Horseman in the Clouds would kill him, or his horse would throw him and break his neck. That there might be not a shadow of doubt as to his sincerity in speaking as he had, the Dakota beside him whipped out a knife and presented the point to the plainsman's lips as an ultimate test. Fevernager unhesitatingly opened his mouth and closed his teeth on the blade. Now, had he lied, he would shortly die by the knife.

"He bites the knife!" loudly announced the Dakota; and he held the weapon high above his head.

"Very soon he will die under a skinning knife to show his tongue is crooked," called back Black Shield.

But Red Cloud was convinced the old man had told the truth, and he was worried. What had been a simple matter of catching a trespasser in a sacred place now took on a more involved and more serious phase. Even if a dream had been a decoy to trap white men, a Dakota must proceed carefully and with the utmost assurance before assuming the responsibility of executioner. Then again Red Cloud had a genuine liking for the plainsman. If white men were fewer in the West and were as ready as Fevernager to adopt the red mode of living there would be no deep-seated hostility extended to them.

"You say Medicine Calf left you to make new medicine and nothing else?" asked Red Cloud.

"Your brother does not know."

"Do you say that for the Thunderers to hear; for the Horse to hear?"

"No. In my head may be a thought, many thoughts, why he went away to do something besides make medicine. One of the thoughts may be the truth. But I do not know."

This explanation was not satisfactory, and yet it was within reason. Red Cloud could appreciate the terrible dilemma of a man who discovered he had sworn falsely although believing he had spoken the truth.

The chief remarked, "If your medicine wants to help you it will send Medicine Calf to you before we reach Red Cañon Creek. If he does not overtake us we will know the dream was sent him so he could lead you to Black Shield."

"That is a foolish talk. There is no war between the Dakotas and the whites. The Great White Father is making peace with all the Plains tribes. The Dakotas who go to white towns are not tried and killed."

"White men tried to kill young Kensler," reminded the chief.

"The man was drunk and raced his horse through crowded streets. A man shot a bottle of whisky from his hand. He was not hurt. It is men like Kensler, who are part Dakota, who show pieces of gold in white towns and tell where they found them."

This ended the talk and left Red Cloud with bitter thoughts for the halfbreed. The haste of the horsemen brought them to within a few miles of Red Cañon when darkness overtook them. The night was calm and the heavens blazed with stars. Ursa Major, some said, was an ermine. Ho-ke-win-la, the Turtle Man, who stands in the moon with outstretched arms, was watching them. But none of the Dakotas cared to study the heavens for fear he might begin counting, and if he did that and did not count all he would die.

A halt was called to rest the horses and to allow the leaders to confer. Red Cloud did not offer to take part in the deliberations until invited to do so. He briefly advised making camp where they were. Starting at daybreak they would soon be clear of the cañon. The horses greatly needed rest and the night was clear and the Thunderers were asleep.

The prisoners promptly were pulled to the ground as if they were so many bags of merchandise. The hands of one at a time were released long enough for him to eat some jerked meat, tough as leather, and drink some water. The three were tightly trussed up for the night and two guards stationed.

Fevernager and Darby slept poorly because of their bonds. Gorl slept scarcely any because of his great fear. When the three were freed from their wrist bonds in the morning and given some beef the Easterner acted as if he did not know where he was, or who he was. He stared at the meat stupidly and gaped in a puzzled manner at his captors. The Indians watched him furtively, and his hands were not tied when it came time to start and ride to the cañon. The formation of the line was the same as on the preceding day. The old plainsman found no cheer in the morning sun. He moodily remarked:

"It's all account o' him—to dream of rattlesnakes."

"He's faring better than we are," growled the Southerner. Had his hands been untied he would have attacked the man beside him, even though he knew the act would bring instant death. He glared into the red mask of a face, for his guard was the warrior who had killed a Shoshone, and told him, "If I get the chance I'll kill you for that. The slightest chance."

The man caught the tone of a threat

and his eyes were murderous as he whipped out a knife. Black Shield shrilly warned, "No blood here! When it comes time for a man to die he must have much time. He must die slow."

Gorl lifted his head and, although not understanding the Shield's admonition, relevantly cried out, "All I ask is a chance to make a fighting finish! Never believed the time would come when I would envy Elder Keen."

Darby invited another blow by curtly demanding of the plainsman, "Can't we help ourselves someway?"

"No chance yet. Don't talk. They'll bash your lips to ribbons. If we was free an' could make a break I'd stand a thin chance of gittin' clear. No chance for you two."

"When will it happen?" asked Darby in a scarcely audible voice.

"At Red Crick. Been prayin' to white 'n' red gods to send young Baltimore back before we git there."

"He could help us?"

"He'd have to, or prove his dream's a liar. Dream said three would ride back. Red Cloud opines that means back from th' hills to th' mouth of th' cañon. I know better. It said, back to th' Platte. Jest now I'd git my satisfy if I could cash in quick. Hate to be skun alive."

"Not that!" cried Darby. "Surely someway——"

"Hush yer chatter! Perk up. Don't let 'em git th' notion you're scared. Sing some tune."

Darby lifted his head and in a strong voice began singing a gold camp parody on "Oh! Susannah."

"I've been to Californy,
With my washbowl on my knee;
I've seen the tallest elephant
That ever mortal see;
He measures from one tip to tip
About a million feet,
And from the other tip to tip
The critter can't be beat."

"Hooray! Hell's afloat an' th' river's risin'! All together!" shouted the old plainsman. And unchecked by the wondering Dakotas the two loudly gave the brief refrain to the effect:

"Oh! Californy!
You're not the land for me;
I've been an' left the washbowl
I had upon my knee."

Several more verses describing life on and off the "'Liza ship" were given. When the singers ceased for want of breath, Red Cloud remarked, "The white men have very stout hearts. They sing their death song."

"They sing a medicine song, Makhpiasha. It is a strong song. It is answered."

The last was prompted by the dull rumbling of thunder, tumbling in from the east. Every Indian stared apprehensively, expecting to see the thunder caps pushing above the ridge. There was indecision in each red mind, although the sky over the park was clear. Should they risk being caught during a thunder storm in Red Cañon, or wait where they were. Fevernager hoarsely bellowed:

"I've scraped them mountains clear, my boys,
An' drained them rivers dry;
My pocket's full enough of rocks,
The gold dust in my eye;
It ain't so hard to raise th' dust,
If a feller'll only blow;
'Tis windy business, blowin' is,
As whales an' blackfish know."

Black Shield shot down the line and menaced the plainsman with his knife, then pivoted his horse and rode beside Red Cloud, and asked, "What does Makhpiasha say?"

"Ride through the cañon," was the prompt reply.

"The white men sing a bad medicine song," said Black Shield.

"They waited too long. We can be out of the hills before their medicine can work. Ride on."

Black Shield raced to the head of the line and waved his hand as he led in a gallop to the mouth of the cañon. Big Foot threw back his head and staring up at the red rocks essayed to nullify any effect of the white man's song by chanting in worship of Tunkan, or Inyan, the stone god, and perhaps the oldest of all the Dakota deities. Red was the color used in painting rocks, in petitioning Tunkan, and Red Cañon was an unusually strong medicine place. So Big Foot, not believing himself worthy to address Wakantanka direct, asked the sacred stones to act as intercessor.

Leaving the rumble of the storm behind them the little procession rode into the twilight of the cañon. Overhead the sky was palely blue, but the sound of spears shattering against each other was audible. Bits of loose rock rattled down to the cañon floor. Big Foot kept up his song. After a while the Thunderers ceased their warring, defeated by the Unktehi, Big Foot believed; and those who had blankets or robes over their heads, let them drop to the waist and held their heads high and stared eagerly ahead for the first glimpse of the open country.

To the prisoners it seemed as if the journey through the cliffs would never end, and this curiously enough, inasmuch as each feared he must begin to die once he came to the shore of the creek.

Black Shield yelped joyously and urged his horse into a mad gallop. The others quickened their pace and in turn saw the world framed by the mouth of the cañon. Every Indian was greatly elevated in spirit now he had left a medicine or mystery place sealed up behind him. They emerged from the haze of superstition and became objective. Once the horses were picketed and a fire started they danced around the prisoners and gloated over them.

Such supplies not cast into the creek were opened to garnish the dried meat. After pipes were smoked to the sun, the winds, and to Tunkan, the earth god, the prisoners were allowed to eat and drink. As soon as they were finished they were tied, hand and foot, and propped in a sitting posture to await their fate. Black Shield called his men around him to determine just what program of slow killing should be followed. Fevernager was glad neither of his companions understood the ghastly propositions under discussion. Red Cloud was invited to give his opinion.

"There is much time to talk about this. Take them to the White River and then talk," he advised.

Black Shield did not relish this suggestion. He reminded, "The white men are my prisoners. My medicine was very strong and led me to them."

Red Cloud promptly conceded, "Makhpia-sha hears no voice saying the white men are not Black Shield's prisoners. Black Shield is a very brave man. It is told in many tipis how he took the war path against the Crows, who killed his two sons eight winters ago. It would take much talk to speak of the brave coups Black Shield has counted. But this place is near a sacred place. The Thunderers, or Tunkan, might hear the sound of white men dying and roll a rock down, or drop a spear, because the noise stops their sleep."

The leader of the Bad Faces was highly pleased by this public praise from a man who had counted eighty coups. In a more amiable voice he replied, "Black Shield's heart would be happy to do as his great brother says and move the prisoners to the White. But the medicine that pointed out the white men and led the Shield's band to them is very hungry. If it is not fed very soon it will grow weak. Every Dakota man must make his medicine strong so he can fight the white men. Makhpia-sha has told us that."

Grunts of approval ran around the circle. Red Cloud bowed gravely. He would have spared the plainsman, at least, but he could not urge what another man should do with his prisoners. He was willing to exert his influence indirectly, however, and he asked, "Does the hungry medicine ask for the blood of three men?"

"It asks for the blood of the three. It says it will grow weak unless fed," promptly replied Black Shield.

For a minute Red Cloud stood gazing into the east. The circle of men courteously waiting to hear him further. He began, "There is Medicine Calf. We call him our son. He left our villages some winters ago. Last winter he came to us. The old man who has slept and eaten in our lodges. Tells me by the Thunderer and by the Horse that Medicine Calf had a dream and was told to bring three white men to these hills. The old man says that Medicine Calf was with them on the creek where they were caught by Black Shield. It is said by the Flying One and the Thunderer that Medicine Calf brought them up after he was told to do so by a *heyoka* dream. Does Black Shield wait until the Medicine Calf comes here?"

Black Shield had no idea of waiting for a man who might never come, and who, did he come, might cause a hitch in the torture plans. He knew young Baltimore's history. If the death of the prisoners conflicted with the young man's dream, that was the young man's bad luck. The Bad Faces had been presented with three white prisoners by the same medicine that had permitted the chief to score a terrible victory at Fort Phil Kearney. One did not affront such a medicine by showing a lack of appreciation. He told Red Cloud:

"A voice whispers that Medicine Calf's dream sent him and the white men into the hills so the Shield's medicine might be fed."

Red Cloud bowed courteously and walked slowly to where Fevernager was propped against a boulder. In a low voice he confessed, "Makhpia-sha can do nothing for you. There is a medicine waiting to be fed. You will die like a brave man and show the young men how to travel the last road. Makhpia-sha can ask Black Shield to kill you first."

"My heart is filled with thanks to Makhpia-sha," quietly replied the old man. "My years are like a few grains of sand from the Platte, dropping between my thin fingers. It does not matter when I die. Your friend asks for one thing." He paused and Red Cloud nodded for him to finish.

"Black Shield's medicine was strong to put us in his hands unless it was doing what the Medicine Calf's medicine told it to do. It does not ask to be fed now. Will Makhpia-sha ask Black Shield to wait two suns before killing us?"

Red Cloud returned to the circle and addressed the leader of the Bad Faces, saying, "The medicine of a great chief never grows so weak it must be fed at once like a hungry man. The heart of Makhpia-sha will be glad if the three men are not killed until two suns have passed."

BLACK SHIELD was displeased by this request although he was careful not to reveal that much. He had planned to initiate at once what was expected to furnish enjoyment for hours, or so long as the vital spark could be kept alive in the victim under the cunning knives. Because of his medicine he already had refused one request made by the greatest of the Oglala Dakotas. He would be within his rights in refusing a second time, but he did not wish to offend Red Cloud; nor could he afford to confess the medicine was in such straits as to demand immediate execution. Much against his will he finally conceded:

"When the sun is going down in the west for the second time it shall be done. After one sleep and when the sun is going down it shall be done."

Red Cloud said, "Makhpia-sha hears a brave man promise."

"The Sun hears me," promptly vowed the Shield.

Now he was irrevocably bound, even if the delay should mean the arrival of, and a rescue by, a body of white men. His men were greatly disappointed by the promise, although none imagined there could be any danger of an interruption. Red Cloud bowed his appreciation, and then announced he was starting at once for the White and that Big Foot was riding with him. The latter was disgruntled as he had expected to enjoy the torture before continuing his journey.

Going to the old plainsman Red Cloud said, "You heard him. The Sun heard him say it. When the sun is going down the second time it will be done. May you find many buffalo and much happiness in the ghost land."

"Good-by, Chief. May you die in your bed," returned Fevernager. Red Cloud, in a hurry to be on his way, secured his horse, and, reluctantly followed by Big Foot, forded the creek and galloped south.

Neither Darby nor Gorl had any idea of what had been said. Fevernager informed them, "Living in red lodges gits us something. They won't harm us till sundown tomorrer. If ye have any medicine that's working, ask for help before tomorrer afternoon. If ye have to die an' ye ain't picked first, try not to look. It ain't pretty to watch. The best thing any of us can do is to cheat th' hellions by gittin' hold of a knife long 'nough to kill hisself. All comes of Gorl's dreamin' 'bout rattlesnakes!"

"Merciful heavens! What an alternative!" exclaimed Gorl.

"That's a new card in th' deck for me. Hark!" The plainsman cocked his ear to catch what the circle was talking about. The man with the red face was speaking. First he bitterly resented the period of waiting. Then he urged, "The promise, made to the Sun, will be kept if the white men are alive at the going down of the sun after one more sleep. That promise does not mean little cuts cannot be made in them. It means they must not be killed until the time of the promise."

A moment of tense silence was followed by joyous exclamations of approval. The men scrambled to their feet and drew their skinning knives and gazed eagerly at Black Shield. The suggestion appealed strongly, but his heart was troubled. He would be keeping faith with Red Cloud if none of the prisoners died before the stipulated time, at sunset on the morrow. They could be maimed and made to suffer worse than death in the meanwhile without vitiating in any way the promise made to the great Oglala leader. It was not this phase of the matter that troubled Black Shield. There was his oath, "The Sun hears me." To infringe even in the slightest upon the solemnity of that sacred vow would make his plight infinitely worse than that of a tortured prisoner.

"Damn 'em! Up to gum games. They'll soon be coming for us," hoarsely whispered Fevernager.

The Dakotas waited, wolf eyed, while their leader concentrated to recall, not his exact words, but his trend of thought in making the promise. There must be no mistake. He went over Red Cloud's words in his mind, following them carefully as he would follow a trail. He decided that so far as Red Cloud's request was worded he would be within his promise even did he permit immediate torture. Again he examined his own thoughts when he gave the promise. He recalled his chagrin in feeling compelled to grant the request. Had he made the mental reservation that the men should be tortured, yet kept alive until tomorrow's sunset, he would have felt no chagrin. He lifted his head and Fevernager strained his ears to hear the verdict.

"They can not be tortured until it is time for them to die. The Sun heard me," slowly announced Black Shield.

"They ain't raked in the pot yet," whispered the plainsman. "Git ready for some more of that song."

The red-faced man loudly insisted no pledge covered the treatment of the prisoners in the interim of waiting. He reminded his leader of the blows given Darby, cutting his lips until they bled.

But this was sophistry. Black Shield shook his head and answered, "The white man was struck before the promise was given. When I promised Makhpia-sha my heart was heavy to know the white men could not be hurt until the second sunset. I was thinking of that when I said the Sun hears me. It was not in my words to Makhpia-sha, but it was in my head. Is there a man here who would hurt one of the white men if he had promised as Black Shield promised? If so let him swear by the Sun."

He stared around at the glaring circle of eyes and as his gaze dwelt on each savage face that man winced and looked away. The Shield went further and warned them, "Your leader's promise is over you. If one of you draws blood with the prick of a knife, or by a blow, he is worse than a dead man. That man will be a man without a medicine."

Fevernager barked like a coyote and cried, "They can't even hustle us 'round till tomorrer at sundown! They're all tied up by their promise to Red Cloud. Hell's afloat an' th' river's risin'! Start your singin', Darby."

The Southerner did not understand what it was all about, but he knew the situation had changed for the better, and aided by the plainsman's shrill voice he sang more of the old ditty.

"The folks in Californy
They drink a dreadful sight;
You see a feller very loose,
And then you see one tight,
The loose one shoots the tight one,
And then they write the folks,
That a grizzly bear devoured him!
And it's a very bear-faced hoax."

"Once more on th' chorus, lad!" gleefully cried the plainsman.

"Oh, Californy!
You're not the land for me,
I've been an left the washbowl
I had upon my knee."

"They have made medicine. They make us act like foolish men," lamented the Shoshone killer.

Getting his breath Fevernager explained to Darby and the wild-eyed Easterner, "You can talk all you want to now without bein' banged in th' mouth. The big buck has swore no one shall touch any one of us roughlike till it's time for us to peg out. Think of a man bein' such a bodacious fool! Had every card in the deck an' can't play his hand till sundown tomorrer."

Coming out of his daze the Easterner slowly asked, "Does that mean we're in no danger? Can go away from here?"

"Gorl, we've got till tomorrer afternoon to live," explained Fevernager. "You ain't much good. Darby's worth a hundred of you. But you're the only one who stands any show in this queer game. It's a mighty slim show an' mebbe you can't work it. Go ahead 'n' laff 'n' sing. Do anything that looks crazy. If you can wipe th' scared look from your eyes an' make 'em think you're crazy they'll pass you up."

Gorl's chin sank back on his chest. With a groan he cried, "Would to God I could go crazy, and forget all I see and hear. You think I'm weak. I am, but worse even than what I must go through is the hell of thinking of that girl back in Cheyenne. Just waiting there and believing I've quit her."

Being denied the pleasure of torturing the white men the Indians passed away the morning hours in eating the sugar captured at the creek, and in recounting their war and hunting experiences. The Shoshone killer announced his intention to paint the inside of his wildcat robe with the salient features of the morrow's torture. Another catered to the leader's vanity by declaring many of the next winter counts would commemorate the killing of the prisoners. He could even see the last pictograph of the long spiral. And aloud he read it: "Black Shield-tortures-three-white-men-winter."

Fevernager loudly called out, "Black Shield-lost-three-white-men-winter."

Only the promise, heard by the Sun, saved him from cruel punishment. Realizing their helplessness the old man jeered them and laughed in cackling derision. Black Shield panted heavily as he announced, "That man is for my knife. He will have a different winter count to tell the ghosts."

Darby begged his friend not to infuriate the Indians. "Bah! Who's scared of them dogs till termorrer afternoon," replied Fevernager.

JUST as the mid-day meal was finished, the band was thrown into great alarm by a clattering noise at the mouth of the cañon. The men jumped to secure their weapons, although mightily fearing to behold something hideously *wakan*. Then a brave was shouting in relief. He danced and laughed and pointed. Three burros were sedately trotting from the cañon. The sagacious animals, wishing for companionship, had followed the white men south over the old lodge-pole trail. The Indians were much impressed by the loyalty of the small creatures. They watched them, "little medicine dogs," as they circled the camp and approached the prisoners from the east.

Darby told the plainsman, "It's foolish, but their coming has made me feel a little hopeful. It's the first suggestion of hope I've felt since we were snagged."

"They're mighty fine creeturs," agreed Fevernager. "But unless they can stop the sun we'll be beggin' for death at sunset termorrer."

One of the burros nuzzled under Gorl's arm, seeking sugar. The Easterner stared at it, then at Darby, and asked:

"Hurt like hell, won't it? What we've got to go through."

"I'm afraid so. The worse your state of mind is the worse it will hurt."

Gorl laughed hysterically and told them, "I've died a million hideous deaths already."

"They'd be awful pleased if they knew that," grunted the plainsman. Then he sharply called Black Shield by name and demanded the three of them be allowed to walk around so their blood would wake up. He added that being so tightly bound was plain torture. The chief promptly directed that the men's feet be untied and hobbled by a short length of thong. Darby was not inclined to take any exercise. But the plainsman harshly insisted.

"Git on your pins, you young fool! Up with you, Gorl. Stay by the crick. I'll walk south, singin' a medicine song. They'll be watchin' me. You two git into th' crick an' drown yourselves."

Gorl gave a horrible groan. Darby exclaimed, "And you, old friend?"

"It's th' only chance you'll git to cheat 'em. No woman waits with hair over her eyes fer me. I'm old. I'll go through with it."

"No, no! No!" shouted Gorl, his loud voice concentrating the red gaze on him. "I've lived a fool. But I'll go as you go. That's something Elder Keen can't laugh at, if he knows what we're facing."

"Keen's got other matters to 'tend to," muttered the plainsman. "You'll take th' chance, Darby?"

Darby was sorely tempted. He stared for a moment at the clear brown waters of the creek; then wrenched his gaze away. "I'll go with the crowd," he decided.

"Two poor fools! Never git such a gilt-edged chance many times more. Mebbe you'll feel more keen 'bout it in th' morning. I won't wander an' sing till then."

Their walk ended, however, when two young men racing their horses in a half circle south of the camp gave a discovery cry. A mounted Indian topped the crest of the nearest ridge. The young men rode to meet him. The prisoners were thrown to the ground and tied. The newcomer, escorted by the two men, came down the slope and toward the creek. They forded the stream and entered the camp. The visitor shouted greetings to his friend, Black Shield, and swung from his horse and deposited his parfleche, containing his war finery, on the ground.

Fevernager stared up at him and told his companions, "Mebbe his coming will help but I can't see how. If Baltimore was here I'd be glad this buck come in. He's Black Dog. He pretends not to know me, but we've known each other for years." Then he demanded the newcomer's attention by calling out to him:

"What does Black Dog have to say to his old friend?"

Black Dog stared at him for a moment but gave no sign of recognition. Turning to Black Shield he said, "When do the white men die? I will paint and put on my medicine shirt when they go under the knives."

"What does he say?" anxiously asked Darby.

"Just a bit of lingo. His coming won't help us any."

CHAPTER XI

BROKEN MEDICINE

BLACK DOG'S arrival was celebrated with a feast as Black Shield considered him to be a man worthy of high honors. The young men brought in antelope. The prisoners were fed early, and then tied up and ignored. Squatting by the kettles, Black Dog told his host he had met Red Cloud and Big Foot a few miles from the White as he was riding to the Teton River. Voices had talked to him while he was in camp on the Niobrabra, and had told him to take paint and medicine-shirt and ride toward the Teton. His medicine was strong and had helped him count many coups. Its benign aid was always extended to his friends. His medicine was now insisting that many whites must be killed so as to put fear in the heart of the Great White Father, who was father of the whites and cared nothing about the red men.

When the feasting was ended two young men, heavy with food and finding it difficult to keep awake, hooded their blankets over their heads and took their positions to the east and west of the camp as sentinels. The remaining twelve men stretched out to sleep, enclosing the prisoners in a big circle, the red legs being the spokes and the white men the hub of the living wheel. Light cords were hitched to each white man and tied to a warrior's thumb. This precaution was not necessary as the three men were so tightly bound it was impossible for any to free his hands. This night all three of the prisoners slept. Darby and Gorl were like men drugged. The old plainsman was too used to danger to waste his strength in useless wakefulness.

Darby was the first, red or white, to open his eyes. The east was a dull red. Birds were rejoicing over a new day. For a few moments he did not remember and stared dully at the sky. Then the horrible realization that this was his last day swept through him and unmanned him for a bit. It seemed incredible, yet it seemed inevitable that he had reached his last morning. He felt as if the bottom of his stomach was dropping out. His hands and feet were without the sense of life because of the tight cords. His despairing gaze took note of the two huddled heaps, each a sleeping sentinel. Then his eyes swept over the silent mounds, each hiding a man intent on killing white men with the most exquisite torture.

Suddenly he became objective and jerked his shoulders and twisted his head to the left and to the right. The moccasins of the warrior behind him protruded from under the blanket. Beginning with this man, to make sure he did not err in his count he slowly cast his gaze over the sleepers, and lifted his head to see more clearly those beyond his feet. Finishing his count and believing he must have made a mistake he began with the exposed moccasins and repeated. The answer was the same. There were fifteen red sleepers in the camp; or one more than had been present when the warriors took to their blankets.

He even went through the simple problem a third time to make sure his mind was not fooling him. Fifteen Indians composed the band that surprised and captured him and his friends on the creek up in the hills. Red Cloud and Big Foot had departed and Black Dog had come in. Fourteen Indians had gone to sleep. One Indian more or less could make no difference in his fate, but he was puzzled how the fifteenth man had entered the camp without arousing him. Surely he must have called out and must have been challenged by the sentinels. And surely this exchange would have aroused the sleepers. There must have been much stirring about and the exchange of friendly greetings.

He lifted his head again and saw that Fevernager's eyes were open. The plainsman, facing the east, hoarsely whispered, "There's blood on this day."

"Count the savages," murmured Darby.

Gorl was snoring heavily without disturbing the sleepers, but the barely audible whispering brought the warrior on Darby's right to a sitting position. He glanced around the circle, glared at the prisoners, and sank back in his blanket.

Fevernager raised his head while he ran his gaze around part of the circle. Lying flat he twisted his head and stared behind him.

"Extry Injun!" he murmured. "Who is he, an' how'n sin did he git in without wakin' me?"

Several men suddenly sat up. Among them was Black Shield. He stretched out his arms and was in the act of doubling them when he froze, and stared incredulously around the circle. One sweeping glance, and he was on his feet and calling out, "What stranger crept in among us while we slept?"

Before he had finished his query all but one of the men were erect, staring at Black Shield, at each other, and at the one silent figure. The man with the wildcat robe cried, "There is one too many here!"

Gorl came to his senses and yawned luxuriously; then remembered, and groaned in bitterest despair. All eyes were focused on the one recumbent figure. Darby was telling himself there was no one under the blanket when the covering was slowly pushed aside. Then a man was standing erect, stretching and doubling his arms.

"By gawdfrey! If it ain't young Baltimore!" shrilly cried the old plainsman.

BLACK SHIELD stared at the young man with much uneasiness in his gaze. Black Dog was the first to speak. He said, "Our friend, the Medicine Calf, is with us. Did a bird drop him down here?"

Ignoring the prisoners Baltimore advanced to Black Dog and Black Shield and solemnly shook hands with each, and announced, "The Dakota men are growing old. Their ears are filled up. A Shoshone warrior could have entered this camp in the night and have broken every head with a club."

"Medicine Calf walks as softly as the shadow of a cloud," muttered Black Shield. "Why is he here?"

"A dream sent me here. It is good when a dream sends a man to his friends."

"A dream sent Black Dog here," informed Black Shield. "This must be a *wakan* place."

"Medicine Calf's dreams are *wakan*. My heart is glad my white friends are kept safe by my Oglala brothers. But why are they tied?"

"That is to be talked about," grunted Black Shield, his eyes glittering with anger. "They are bad flesh. They die after the sun goes down."

"How can they die when a *keyoka* dream says three shall ride back to the Platte?" sternly demanded Baltimore. "An Oglala man is speaking. What Oglala man can spoil a *keyoka* dream? Black Shield talks like a foolish man when he says he will spoil his medicine by killing men who are protected by the Horsemen. Black Shield speaks with a straight tongue when he says this is to be talked about. We will eat and then find truth in our hearts."

The Oglalas heard this with consternation and rage filling their hearts. If the impact of their angry gaze could have killed, then young Baltimore would have died on his feet. To be cheated out of their legitimate prey was monstrous to contemplate; yet none could go against the Horsemen. Black Dog insisted: "Something is bad here. Voices told me to ride north with paint and my medicine shirt to see white men die. A dream does not fight a dream."

"The voices you heard cannot fight a *keyoka* dream," quietly replied Baltimore. "Oglala men knew about my dream before the last snow. Makhpia-sha talked with me about it. Oglala men helped me go through the *Heyoka Kaga*. Oglala men with empty heads laughed at me. The wise men did not laugh. They knew I had dreamed of the Thunder Birds. Three men must ride back to the Platte. We will eat and talk when our stomachs are full."

In sullen silence two kettles of water were hung over the fire and meat was added. While waiting for the meat to cook Black Shield and Black Dog sat apart conversing in low tones. Baltimore strolled about the camp, pausing before each warrior, and greeting nearly all of them as an old acquaintance, and recalling to their minds some hunting experience, or village merry-making of which they knew. His bearing was cheerful and confident. He expressed regret that he had arrived too late to see Red Cloud.

Some of the men would not reply to his talk; others spoke briefly. He did not appear to notice this reticence. He knew they were thinking about the medicine that had permitted him to enter the camp and roll in a blanket without awakening a sleeper. As his red name indicated, it was commonly believed there was something *wakan* about him. And it was in the minds of all he had spent the winter with different bands of the Oglalas. Nor was he unlike them in appearance, now he was naked to the waist and his skin was tanned by sun and wind to a dark copper color.

Not until he had passed around the circle did he advance to his friends. He stared down at them for a minute without speaking. Then he kneeled and loosened their bonds but did not remove them. He was fiercely watched as he took this liberty.

He told Fevernager, "Remain quiet. You're in trouble. I'll get you out, or die with you."

Gorl amazed his friends by eagerly asking, "Did you find it? Where is it?"

Baltimore scowled at him and muttered, "Only a white man could think about that when in the shadow of death. Yes, I found what I looked for. I left it back of the camp, a few miles from the mouth of the cañon. The place they stop at when cutting new lodge-poles. Two buffalo skulls show where it is hidden. But the best the medicine of the hills can do for you is to send you home alive. Forget about everything else. Don't try to talk to me unless I speak to you first."

Again Gorl made the Indians uneasy with his wild laughter. He exclaimed, "What a finish! Wealth? Open road back to the Platte? No! Quick death at the best."

"Quick death is a mighty good best if we don't git clear," said Fevernager. "Younker, sudden death'll be the best thing you ever give me if it comes to cashin' in on this crick."

"No more talk," warned Baltimore. "They're uneasy as it is." He hurriedly walked away from them to where Black Shield and Black Dog were sitting. He seated himself between them. Black Dog knew him more intimately than any other man in the camp. The Shield was not inclined to talk; but Black Dog was curious to learn the details of the Thunder dream. Baltimore told him:

"After we have eaten. It will be told once. Then the Oglala will say if they will go against the dream. Men have lost their medicine by doing that."

Black Shield and his men were in a ferocious state of mind. None thought of offering physical violence to the intruder; for his status was that of an Oglala and he had been under the protection of Red Cloud and Crazy Horse. Every man in the circle knew his history. Each man accepted him as the adopted son of the nation. They resented his going away to live with the whites, and they were pleased when he returned to them in the late fall. There was a general silence, broken only by the occasional murmuring of Darby and the plainsman, or by the strident laughter of Gorl.

AT LAST the meat commenced to boil, and without waiting for it to cook through, knives were used in cutting off big pieces. After all but the prisoners had eaten Baltimore took what was left in the kettle to his friends and untied one man at a time and waited until he had eaten. It was Black Dog who brought a kettle of water so they might drink. As soon as a man finished with food and water Baltimore trussed him up, but not too tightly. He served Fevernager last, and with no perceptible motion of the lips the plainsman directed:

"Spot where they put our guns."

"I'll look. But I don't think it can be done that way. They can't go against my dream."

"They can go ag'inst hell an' wave red flags," growled the plainsman.

Baltimore stood up and called out to Black Shield, "Let three men stay here to watch these men. We will go away and talk."

The guards were named and the rest of the band went with Baltimore up the creek for a short distance. Baltimore produced a pipe and filled it and lighted it and passed it to Black Shield to smoke. The pipe traveled around the circle and back to Baltimore, who smoked with scrupulous care to the red gods of the sky, the water and the earth. There followed a few minutes of silence, and then Baltimore opened the talk by detailing what several had heard about during the winter: his Thunder-bird dream. He warned of the awful penalty attached to any opposition to the will of the Thunderers. He stressed the point that the dream was explicit in telling him three men should ride back to the Platte.

After a brief pause Black Shield spoke and stated that while no man with a head on his shoulders would dare anger the Thunder beings, yet there were some dreams hard to intrepret. He cited Black Dog's dream, in which voices told him to ride north to see white men die. He had come to Red Cañon Creek as a result of that dream. He had brought his most cherished possession, his medicine shirt, to fulfill the requirements of the dream. How could both men be right in their dreams? Did the Horsemen send one, and Tunkan, the earth god, send the other? This question was not put for rhetorical effect, but because of a genuine desire to get at the truth. Black Dog, finding he was appealed to, slowly replied:

"The Thunderers changed their minds. They sent my dream so the Oglala men would know."

"Do you say that for the Sun and the Horsemen to hear?" sternly challenged Baltimore.

Black Dog twisted uneasily. He had no idea of courting destruction by falsifying under such a solemn oath. He evaded by suggesting, "Perhaps Tunkan sent it. He always fights the Horsemen."

"Does Black Dog follow Tunkan and fight against the Horsemen?" pressed Baltimore.

Black Dog glanced upward uneasily, to see if thunder caps were eavesdropping. He muttered, "No red man takes sides when the Horsemen ride against Tunkan."

"Now Black Dog speaks with a straight tongue. His dream was a weak dream. His heart was hungry to see white men die. So he dreamed his wish. That is not a *wakan* dream," said Baltimore.

"His heart would be happy if he could see all white men die now," angrily cried Black Dog.

"He has said it!" declared Baltimore. "He speaks with a straight tongue. He goes to sleep, wishing to see white men killed. His head keeps on holding the wish after his eyes are closed. His dream was not sent by the Thunderers, or by Tunkan. Not able to catch white men to kill he rides up here to find a brave chief who has prisoners. If his dream were sent by the Thunderers, or by Tunkan, he would catch his own prisoners."

This statement and its praise appealed to Black Shield's vanity, and greatly enraged Black Dog. The latter grimly reminded, "Oglala men know how Black Dog can kill. His medicine shirt is made of scalps taken from white people he has killed."

"Then let his heart be happy in thinking about that instead of being heavy because he can't help kill another man's prisoners. There are many white people to be caught and killed, but the three men in this camp are under the protection of the Horsemen in the Cloud," said Baltimore.

Black Shield was much perturbed. In casting about for a logical reply he hit upon the one weak point in Baltimore's argument. He said, "Medicine Calf was taken in by the Oglala when very small. He is welcome in their villages. His heart has turned red. But no medicine has washed the red into his skin. Where the sun and the wind have not touched it, it is white. His mother was a white woman. Let the Medicine Calf tell us what three white men ride back to the Platte and what white man stays on this creek to die."

"I am an Oglala," insisted Baltimore quietly but firmly.

Black Shield shook his head slowly. "You were white when you came to us. You have been treated like a son. The old man tied back by the kettle has lived with us and was welcome. But he is a white man. You are white. Name the man who stays to die. For the Thunder-bird dream does not cover four men."

"Medicine Calf will stay if it is said he is white," Baltimore told him.

"He cannot stay. He must ride back to the Platte with his white friends, or the young men would ride after them and kill them before they can travel two sleeps from this place," insisted Black Shield. "Makhpia-sha said the white men were to ride from the hills. It is done. Medicine Calf says they ride to the Platte."

"Makhpia-sha, my red father, does not know my dream as well as I do. It was dreamed that three white men ride back to the Platte."

"With Medicine Calf?" sharply asked Black Shield.

Baltimore hesitated. He had been profoundly influenced by his dream. It would be sacrilege for him to distort it. He slowly answered. "I will stay. You may kill me. The white men must take their chances in making the Platte."

"Did the dream say the white men rode back alive, or were tied to their horses and taken back to the Platte dead?" continued Black Shield.

Again Baltimore found himself on the defensive. He had believed in his dream or he would not have brought his friends to the hills. The intrusion of Gorl was responsible for the terrible dilemma of Darby and the plainsman. The dream had meant three people would visit the hills and return in safety. The fourth man made the trouble. The fourth man made sense of Crazy Horse's belief that the dreamer would die. Three could go, but one must remain. His answer was an evasion; for he said, "How could dead men ride? That is foolish talk."

BLACK SHIELD bowed his head and brooded over the problem for several minutes. The young man had made a poor talk. The young man had made a weak talk; still it was obvious he was telling the truth about the dream. The chief knew his followers would be greatly disappointed unless three men were put to the torture; but no one could risk the wrath of the Horsemen, or of any of the stronger gods. He lifted his head slowly and gravely said:

"No man can fight the Horsemen, or Tunkan. We have heard the Medicine Calf's talk. It is strong in spots. In spots it is weak. The dream said three men would ride back. As no man can live in the medicine hills the dream means Medicine Calf is one of the three men. My warriors will have heavy hearts when they know three men cannot be killed for the bad they did in hunting for gold in the hills. But the Horsemen must not be made angry. Two shall ride away with Medicine Calf. One shall stay."

Baltimore endeavored to change his decision, but the Shield and his men were much enraged to kill one, where they had planned to torture three. Seeing the uselessness of arguing further Baltimore said,

"Then take the man with the hair on his face."

Instead of accepting this selection Black Shield shook his head, and explained, "A hand has rested on that man's head. He will ride away with Medicine Calf."

Baltimore retained an appearance of composure, but his heart ached at the thought of returning to his friends and announcing one of them must die. Could he save but one he unhesitatingly would have picked the old plainsman. Darby came next in his affection. Could he have saved the two by sacrificing Gorl he would have planned to shoot the Easterner, if possible, before he could suffer from torture, and thus successfully solve the problem. He did not like Gorl, and he had opposed his coming to the hills.

"The Black Shield has said his last word?" he calmly asked.

"He has. The Sun hears him," promptly answered the Shield.

"How long before I name the man who is to stay?" asked Baltimore, now rising to his feet.

Black Shield's eyes glittered and he lowered his gaze as he replied, "If Medicine Calf wants time to think he can take much time. Name the man before sunset."

"No man will be hurt until I have spoken?"

"Until the sun goes to sleep they shall be treated like brothers," assured the chief.

Baltimore slowly walked back to the fire, his heart heavy. The Indians filed after him, ferociously disappointed that three victims should dwindle to one. Black Dog spoke to several of the younger men and reminded that it was a long journey to the Platte, and that a dream could not always protect white men who had trespassed in the *Mato Tipi* country.

When Baltimore dropped on the ground beside his friends and was slow to speak, Fevernager scanned his dark face sharply and read something of the truth. He encouraged, "You found th' travelin' harder'n you'd reckoned on, son?"

"I am worse off than either of you three are," Baltimore sadly replied. Staring at the ground to avoid their gaze he abruptly added, "One of you must die."

"Oh, my God!" screamed Gorl in a horror-struck voice.

"Keep still, you coward," hissed Baltimore, staring at the Easterner angrily. "The Dakotas want a *man* to kill. It is you who spoiled my dream. I didn't want you, but you would come. You said it was the only way open to you. Now you are not man enough to go through with it. The girl with the medicine hair must be proud of you."

Gorl clamped his bearded lips together for a moment and stared wildly. By a mighty effort he gradually regained control of himself. In a husky voice he said, "What you say is true. I am a coward. I think I will show up better from now on. Once more I ask Darby to carry a message to Dollie. Just tell her I cashed in and wasn't a quitter. It will be partly false, but it will be for her peace of mind. It's the way I die, not death itself, that's scared me."

"Gorl, you're one of the men to ride back to the Platte. The Dakotas think you are crazy. They will not harm you. They will turn you loose," explained Baltimore.

The Easterner stared in amazement at the unexpected news. Fevernager quickly reminded, "Didn't I say it afore we was quit of the Hills? Didn't I say he was th' only one to stand a chance? I knew it when he let out his first wild hoot. So, younker, that's th' pickle you're findin' to be so sour. Ye've got to pick me, or Darby, as th' cuss to go under th' knives. An' I'm sorry for you. It places you in a bad spot."

Baltimore slowly nodded, unable to speak for the moment. Without any show of emotion the plainsman continued, "Then you needn't hold back for a second. I'm 'bout through with life, even if I wa'n't hogtied in a red camp. Darby's young an' got lots of fun ahead of him. When they kill me they won't kill much. Tell Black Shield I'm th' one what's stayin'. An' to tease him just say my ghost will always be at his elbow, laffin' at him."

"No!" opposed Darby, now finding his tongue. "Let's be fair with each other. Neither of us is scared of death. We've faced death too often. It's the way we must die that worries. Let's be fair to Baltimore, and not put the responsibility on him. We'll draw lots. That let's him out of it. Fix a couple of straws for the draw, Gorl."

"Not by a damn' sight!" roared Gorl. "But I'll fix three straws. The skunks want a victim and can have but one. It's not for them to say who they'll take. A few hours of hell under the knives is better than a life of hell. Baltimore, tell them I'm not crazy."

"I can't make them think that, Gorl," Baltimore replied; and his voice was more kindly. "I'd like to, but it's impossible. We can wait before making a decision. Black Shield is sure of his man and isn't in any hurry." He glanced up at the sun, now nearly half way through its day's work, and added, "He said he would wait until sunset. I feared he would want to be about it at once."

"Well, damn his cunning red hide!" gasped Fevernager. Then he broke into a dry, mirthless laugh. "We must all three be *heyoka* men, fools. Ain't any of us told you he can't hurt nary one of us till after sunset along of a promise he give to Red Cloud?"

Baltimore stared blankly at the plainsman for a few seconds; then struck his fist on his knee. "And I thought that for an Oglala man, whose knife is ready, he was being generous!" he mumbled. "He tricked me! He had everything his own way. He didn't have to do that."

"Prob'ly his way of gittin' a laff out of it," suggested Fevernager. "His men's been sorer'n burnt pups along of his promise to Red Cloud."

"Cut us loose now and we'll fight them with our bare hands if we can't get weapons," eagerly urged Gorl.

"Fight them?" mused Baltimore. "Why not? They killed my folks. It's true they brought me up from a baby. It's true they've been kind to me. Many of the Dakota men would die to save me. And I know them better than I know white people. But Black Shield is not one of them. He just the same as lied to me.

He let me think he was being generous. He was a fool not to know one of you would tell me. The dream has lied to me. It would rob me of a friend. I would have named Gorl, because I do not like him very much. I offered to stay and die, but they would not have me, as they say I am one of them. Crazy Horse believed my dream showed I was to die. He was right. I was born white. It's time I died white. Gorl throws away his chance and says 'fight.' The choice is with you two men. One of you can ride back to Cheyenne with Gorl. What do you two men say?"

"It wouldn't be fair to you——" Darby began.

"Stop! If I can get to your guns will you choose to make a fighting finish?" interrupted Baltimore. "If I can't arm you, will you choose to fight with rocks, your bare hands behind my guns?"

"An' always bless you for th' chance!" roared Fevernager. Then humbly, "No, it ain't just to Darby. Nothin' fair 'bout it. I'll stay. I'll——"

"You're the one who's crazy," broke in Darby. "Baltimore, you're doing us the biggest favor one man ever did for another."

"Get guns if you can," eagerly urged Gorl. "But get a knife for me. We'll at least have enough of them with us when we meet Elder Keen to spoil his joke. Let's get at them now!"

"You can keep out of it and be safe. The three of us will do the fighting," said Baltimore.

"Safe?" fairly screamed Gorl. "Damnation! Stop harping on that. Who wants to be safe if he can have a chance to make a fight?"

The Indians glanced at each other and one revolved an upraised finger close to his head as a reminder that the Great Mystery had placed a hand on the white man's head. Baltimore's expression was almost kindly as he stared at the Easterner. As if reading his thoughts Gorl quietly assured, "It isn't a spasm. Any yelping I do from now on will be play-acting. It's the fear of being tortured, and worrying about what Dollie will think, that's made a coward of me. That's all behind me."

"I believe you, Gorl. And I believe you would have died a very brave man if you had been selected for the knives," slowly said Baltimore. "Now I'll be about my business. We have until sundown to work things out."

HE WALKED slowly about the camp, his head bowed as if in deep thought, and all the while darting quick glances over each pile of red property in his search for the prisoners' weapons. He recognized the butt of a Henry repeater protruding from under a blanket. Near by Darby's heavy belt and its two revolvers rested on a buffalo robe. Several knives were scattered about and the biggest one would be Gorl's. Two rifles and one set of guns were not to be seen. Baltimore had his rifle and two revolvers. Could he release his friends and restore to them the weapons he had located, he believed they would have as many shots as they would have time to fire.

Black Shield, wearing the plainsman's guns, confronted him and asked, "Has the man been named?"

"The two men will draw straws. There is no hurry."

"It is better he is named now, so the others can ride to the Platte. Some of my young men are foolish. They may follow those who ride away. If the white men ride while one is under the knives the young men will not follow."

"As soon as they draw straws the man will be named," replied Baltimore. Several of the Dakotas were gathering dry fuel for the kettles, but not enough to brightly illuminate the camp once the shadows settled. Baltimore wandered to where Black Dog was sitting apart, and greeted, "They say he rides far to see men die he did not help make prisoners."

"He has seen many die, killed by his own hand," grunted Black Dog. "His dream told him to come here."

"His dream was blind. They say he did not know where he was going until he met Makhpia-sha and Si-tanka."

"When Medicine Calf was very small Black Dog could have killed him," angrily retorted the Dakota.

"Many Dakota men could have killed him. They killed all his people. It is not hard to kill a child. Since then I have lived in the villages of Makhpia-sha and other great Dakota men. I have hunted and feasted with Black Dog's band. My heart is heavy that Black Dog is not my friend and does not help my white friends to escape."

Black Dog stared up into the young man's face and coldly replied, "Why should Black Dog help white men? So they can bring more iron horses to raise the buffalo? White men found food and a *tipi* in the old days when they came to us. We treated them like brothers. Now they come and take our food and *tipis* and will leave us to starve."

"My heart is red," said Baltimore, sensing justice in the man's statement.

"You laugh at Black Dog's dream," the Dakota viciously continued. He pointed at the white men and said, "If they were my prisoners all should die. The big man has a weak heart. He is a coward. Wakantanka has not touched his head. Medicine Calf says his heart is red. He talks like a white man. He brings white men to the medicine hills to get gold. He is a white man. He does not take a Dakota woman to keep his lodge swept clean. He has gone back to live with white men. The Dakota should have killed every white man they saw, beginning with the first one to come out here. But they found them hungry and without lodges. They wanted to help them. Now the Dakotas must fight to save themselves. It would be better if Medicine Calf had died when his people died in South Pass."

"And you're sorry I wasn't butchered then and there, damn you!" cried Baltimore, speaking in English.

Before Black Dog could reply a hand was gently placed on the young man's shoulder and Black Shield was saying, "It is really time the white man should be named."

"The name will be spoken before the sun goes down. There is much time," coldly replied Baltimore.

Black Shield glanced up at the sky as he turned away. From northern to southern horizon an ocean of cold gray clouds was advancing from the west. These would bring no thunder storms and, therefore, contained no alarm for the Dakotas. Without turning Black Shield warned:

"The white man should be ready. The sun travels fast when it goes down hill."

"The man will be ready. There is much time," repeated Baltimore; and he smiled grimly at the leader's insistence.

He wandered to where the burros were grazing. He visited his horse. The mounts of his friends were feeding close by and between the camp and the mouth of the cañon. Returning to the prisoners he squatted on his heels and said, "If any of us get to the horses and finds the Dakotas between us and the trail to the Platte we must ride through the cañon into the hills. The night will be dark and the Dakotas will not care to enter the hills until morning. Once through the cañon we can turn into the foothills and hide in the woods. If we have any kind of luck and kill enough of them we can stop them from getting through the cañon. Once free to leave the hills Fevernager, or Darby, can easily follow the trail to Fort Laramie."

"Don't talk like you was goin' to peg out," muttered the plainsman.

"If I'm alive after sundown I'll lead you into and out of the hills. But some of us are likely to get killed. Maybe all of us."

"That'd be all right. We'll have cheated them at that," said Darby.

"The idea is to take quite a few along with us," insisted Gorl.

"Black Shield is getting impatient," continued Baltimore. "Twice he asked me to say which man was to stay."

"Get me a knife! That's all I ask," eagerly urged Gorl. "A knife and free of these cursed leather ropes."

"I can't make a move to bring weapons to you until the last minutes," replied Baltimore. "They must be taken by surprise. It's several hours to sunset."

Darby stared up at the horizon-wide raft of clouds and remarked, "Once those clouds reach us and hide the sun the Indians will have to guess at sunset."

"They know when the sun sets," said Baltimore. "The clouds will help us, though, to make a break."

Fevernager reminded, "No matter how this turns out they're goin' to be deadly mad at you, younker."

"The sunset will wash all the red out of my mind and leave me white. I see many things their way. There are great and good men among them. They have suffered much as a people. Broken promises almost beyond count. Cheated beyond count. But I'm talking red. Crazy Horse said my dream tried to tell me I was to die when it showed me the ghost of my little sister. It may be so."

THE smooth, gray canopy was rapidly advancing to the east. The white men were glad to see this promise of a dark night. Fevernager began to hope some of them would escape. Could they secure the initial advantage by securing weapons and taking the Dakotas by surprise he believed they could fulfill Gorl's hope of taking a respectable number of the enemy with them into death.

Baltimore rose to wander about and as he stood erect the man with the Shoshone robe came up with a kettle of meat. Baltimore eyed him suspiciously and queried:

"You would make them strong?"

"One will need much strength," was the sinister reply. He turned away to avoid further talk but several Dakotas advanced and stood near the prisoners to see that only one man was released from his bonds at a time.

Baltimore untied Gorl's hands first and in a low voice urged him to eat heartily. To Black Shield he called out, "Hunters should be sent to shoot antelope. We shall soon see the bottom of the kettle."

"There will be meat enough for the white men," assured Black Shield. He advanced a few steps and added, "Let a man be named. Let a brave man be named. The one with the hair on his face cannot be named."

"The man will be named when it is time," replied Baltimore.

"Let the man be pointed out now," sternly insisted Black Shield.

"When the man is pointed out do the other two prisoners have an open trail to the Platte?"

"The trail will be open," was the prompt reply.

"Does the Sun hear you say that?" asked Fevernager.

"Black Shield has said it."

"Damn their hides! They figger on torturin' one an' waylayin' t'others, an' lettin' only Gorl git clear," said the old plainsman in English.

"Never mind. It doesn't matter. We must pretend to believe them," murmured Baltimore.

"Which man stays?" insisted Black Shield. The men grouped behind him waited in tense eagerness for the reply.

Baltimore angrily demanded, "Why does Black Shield ask for a man now? The sun must travel far before it sinks from sight. A promise to Makhpia-sha ties the Dakotas' hands until the sun goes down."

"The hands of the Dakotas will soon be untied," was the ominous response. Then the chief pointed to the clouds, now nearly up to the sun, and astounded Baltimore and the plainsman by saying, "When the light is put out the sun has set."

Baltimore started violently, his face flushing with rage and sudden fear. "You dare break your promise to Makhpia-sha, made for the Sun to hear?" he loudly cried. "You dare play tricks on the Horsemen in the Clouds?"

"When the sun goes out of sight for the day it is sunset," insisted Black Shield. "Sometimes the sun sinks behind the top of a mountain. That is sunset. Sometimes it falls very low and sinks behind water. That is sunset. Once it hides behind clouds and will not be seen until the new day, that is sunset."

None of the white men had dreamed of such a dilemma. By a great effort Baltimore regained his self-control and in a steady voice warned, "It will be very bad for the Dakotas if they do this."

Black Shield loosed his pent-up anger and cried, "The Dakotas have been cheated out of two men. They take one man where they should have three. Medicine Calf is turning white. If a man is not named before the sun goes out of sight we will take the two."

" 'Bout fifteen minutes to work in," muttered Fevernager. "You'll have to work fast, younker. Don't waste time talkin'. They mean business."

Baltimore told Black Shield, "Let all the Dakota men go back beyond the fire. Medicine Calf will walk away. The two men shall decide which man stays. Then the two men and Medicine Calf will ride south."

"We do not want the man who has been touched on the head," stipulated Black Shield.

"Howl 'n' shout, ye big lummox," hissed Fevernager.

Gorl began shrieking in wild laughter. The Dakotas fell back in alarm. Baltimore walked up to Gorl and loudly cried, "This man is not wanted. He will go away with me. After it is over I will come to take a live man and dead man to the Platte."

Before any objections could be made he cut Gorl's feet free and yanked him to his feet and holding his arm led him toward the horses. As they walked Baltimore rapidly explained, "I will mount, as if to ride away. You will lead your horse back to the blanket where the gun shows. You will keep shouting and laughing. I will call the men to me. You will find two revolvers beside the rifle under the blanket. There is your big knife. You will pick them up and run and cut the men loose. They will commence shooting, but some will not have guns when they come to me. I will shoot. The Indians will when finding themselves between two fires. The three of you will run to me and those alive will fall back into the cañon."

The edge of the sun was blunted by the cloud mass. Black Shield excitedly cried out, "Name the man! Wakantanka can not wait!"

Gorl started leading his horse into the camp, stumbling because of impaired circulation, and shouting in a frenzy that was not all make-believe.

"Let the Dakota come to Medicine Calf. He has come to them for the last time. He rides away not to see and hear. He has the name. Come and get it."

THERE was a moment of waiting. Baltimore had time to see Black Dog come up over the bank of the creek, his figure enveloped in a blanket decorated with blue paint in the shape of buffalo hoofs. Any degree of success of their desperate plan, Baltimore believed, called for all the Dakota men swarming toward him and placing themselves between two fires. Black Shield slowly advanced a few steps, followed by five men. The others, to escape contact with the blundering advance of Gorl, retreated to where Black Dog was standing.

"The sun is not hidden yet," cried Baltimore to gain a few precious seconds.

"Name the man, Medicine Calf. Name him, or we take both," replied the leader.

Baltimore threw back his head and commenced singing, *"I am a lone wolf. In many places I roam."*

"Why does Medicine Calf sing a wolf song in a camp of the Dakotas?" demanded Black Shield.

A yelp from Black Dog caused him to face about. For a moment he did not catch the significance of what he was beholding. Gorl was bending over the two prisoners. Then he saw the heavy belt clutched in the left hand and the Henry repeater tucked under the arm, while the right hand was slashing with a big knife. And the dying sunshine glittered along the blade. As he saw all this the men by the creek howled in unison and rushed forward to prevent the rescue, only Black Dog holding back. With an answering howl Black Shield leaped through the paralized group behind him. Already Gorl had slashed the thongs securing the wrists of the two men. Without attempting to shift his position Darby began firing with his two guns. Fevernager opened fire with the Henry. Baltimore pulled his revolvers and commenced shooting pointblack at the backs of those running after Black Shield.

Six Dakotas were down inside of thirty seconds from the time the first shot was fired. The others, armed mostly with their skinning knives, separated and scattered in a wild search for guns. With their feet freed Darby and the plainsman hobbled painfully to join Baltimore, and secure their mounts. Gorl caught his horse and mounted and dashed between the two men and the enemy and held that position with Fevernager clutching his stirrup. Darby's guns were empty by the time he reached Baltimore.

The latter yelled, "Mount and ride." Then he resumed his wild wolf song and maneuvered his horse to shelter his friends from the lead now spitting from the Dakotas' six-shooters. Gorl saw the man with the red face daringly advance on his left to secure a rifle that had been overlooked. Armed only with his knife the Easterner ran to intercept him, although his friends yelled for him to come back. The Indian had his wildcat robe wound around his left arm, and promptly gave Gorl battle. The two blades clashed, Gorl getting in several thrusts which were cleverly caught on the protected arm. In turn his coat and shirt were ripped along his left side and he felt the hot bite of the knife point as it slit the skin. Leaping backward with unexpected agility for a man of his bulk he shifted his offensive by hurling the knife. The medicine of the wildcat robe had been too weak to save its first owner. It was weak now and the man staggered back clawing as the haft of the knife sunk deep in the bronzed throat. Grabbing up the rifle Gorl lumbered back to his friends, just as Darby dropped the gun from his left hand as a bullet smashed the bone close to the shoulder.

"Fall back! Fall back!" screamed Baltimore.

It was time they retreated to the cover of the cañon. For now the Dakotas were recovered from their surprise and had secured firearms and were no longer standing in the open.

Baltimore seized Gorl by the arm and helped him to mount a fractious horse. As he straightened from the effort he coughed. Darby, reloading a gun best he could, saw the small blue hole through the bare chest. Baltimore cried for the men to draw apart instead of riding in a huddled group. And his lips were flecked with blood as he spoke.

Fevernager, riding bareback and gripping his horse with his knees, shouted for Gorl and Darby to fall back to the mouth of the cañon and be ready to cover his and Baltimore's retreat.

The two men did as bid, riding hard while their companions gave ground more slowly to prevent the Dakotas from closing in. A leaden pall was over the land and in the gray light the plainsman counted eight out of fourteen warriors either dead or too seriously wounded to move. Darby shouted for Fevernager and Baltimore to ride faster.

"Turn 'n' ride like hell a-hootin', younker!" barked Fevernager, after a glance had told him Darby and Gorl were stoutly situated behind two boulders. He set the example by bending low and sending his terrified mount nito a mad gallop.

Baltimore had his horse reined halfway to follow his friend when he saw something that brought madness into his wild eyes. Black Dog had cast aside his blanket and stood revealed in only a breech-clout and his medicine-shirt. He was painted red from head to foot. His shirt was fashioned from the scalps of his victims. The sun, in almost a *wakan* manner it was so timely, found a weak spot in the gray floor and sent down a shaft of light that seemed to focus on a scalp on the left side of the shirt. It was long, black hair, and was more noticeable because of the light streak, almost the color of yellow silk, running through the center of it. It was like the Spanish girl's hair; and Baltimore knew the last time he had seen it was in South Pass, when he was scarcely more than a baby.

"Go on! Go on!" he screamed after the plainsman. Then he kicked his horse into a mad gallop and dashed wildly towards the creek.

Those crouching on the ground concentrated their fire on him, and his friends saw him sway, and fancied they could hear the *smack* of the lead as it hit the slender figure. Fevernager had halted, but knew his young friend was mortally wounded and beyond all human aid. If not for Darby, seriously wounded, he would have galloped to the creek to make a grand finish. As it was, he remained in the opening, waiting and watching. His rifle cracked whenever a head came into view.

Swaying from side to side, Baltimore cleared the camp and rode direct at Black Dog. The latter emptied his revolver, but if he registered a hit the rider gave no sign of sensing it. The Dakotas now had ceased firing on him, realizing something very *wakan* was taking place. The thought of battle was driven from their heads.

When the horse was almost upon him, Black Dog, howled and turned and ran to the bank and leaped into the creek. A ghost dream had told him he would live until killed by an Oglala man who was not an Oglala man. Horse and rider crashed after him. The Dakotas remained prone to escape the plainsman's lead, but their attention was on the tragedy being enacted under cover of the creek bank. Black Shield and the survivors of his band heard the thin yell of triumph. They pressed closer to the ground, afraid of what they would next see. The escaped prisoners were forgotten. Something *wakan* had happened. A dead man had chased an enemy into the creek.

A red hand came into view, clawing into the bank for support. Another red hand appeared to wave, feebly, a scalp. Then with a final effort all that was left of young Baltimore appeared chest high over the bank and collapsed, face down, and Black Dog's scalp was tightly gripped in one hand.

CHAPTER XII

AND THREE RIDE BACK

A HALT was made just above the north end of the cañon. The old plainsman started a small fire, screened by rocks and bush growth, and by its light attended to Darby's broken arm. He fashioned splints and made a sling; then he gave attention to Gorl's wound, a long knife slash. For himself he did nothing, although he had lost half of an ear, and his face and neck were caked with blood.

The three men no longer feared the Indians, as they knew not more than five or six of them could sit a horse. Also, the plainsman explained, they were panic-stricken. "We've l'arned 'em a lesson they'll never forgit," he added: "They know now it don't pay to play fast 'n' loose with a Thunder-bird dream. That poor boy! That poor boy!"

"I'll never forgive myself for urging him to take me up here," groaned Darby.

"Ye ain't to blame. No one's to blame. It's medicine. It had to end this way for him. That was settled years ago in South Pass when Black Dog got more white scalps for his medicine shirt. If he'd come up here alone it woulda ended 'bout the same. He'd been sure to run afoul o' Black Dog when that skunk was wearin' the scalp shirt. He was bound to know his little sister's ha'r. Black Shield's Bad Faces will think twice afore jumpin' a white outfit ag'in, I reckon. They 'lowed we'd be easy after what they did at Phil Kearney to Fetterman 'n' his men."

"What's our next move?" asked Gorl.

"Git to Fort Laramie 'n' mend Darby's busted arm."

"We must get the gold," insisted Darby. "Baltimore wanted us to have it. He got killed because of it."

"I ain't 'fraid o' Injuns, but I'm 'fraid o' this place. It's *wakan*. It's fastened death on our friend. It's reachin' for us," rapidly replied Fevernager. "We must pull out soon's we can."

"After we get the gold," said Gorl. "Darby's right. We've been through too much not to take the last step."

"I'm 'fraid of this place. I'm 'fraid of th' gold," cried Fevernager.

"Stay here. Gorl and I can find it," said Darby.

"I never said I was scared o' death," growled the plainsman. "I won't touch th' stuff. Don't want any of it. Wouldn't take any if I needed it most mortal. Young Baltimore would never take any of it. But he meddled with it; an' he's dead. But I ain't scared of death. It's near here. If you 'n' Gorl are big fools 'nough to risk it, I'll go along. But my word is to leave it."

"I'd go after it if both arms were broken," gritted Darby.

"We'll need strong medicine," sighed Fevernager. He extinguished the small fire and took turns with Gorl standing watch. The morning was ushered in with sunshine and the songs of birds. It seemed a fair and placid land, yet Fevernager knew the genius was watching them and was plotting malevolently. Before he would seek the hidden gold he insisted on eating, and somberly declared; "Maybe our last meal together."

Leaving them to watch the mouth of the cañon he ranged up the lodge-pole trail and shot an antelope. What they did not eat for breakfast they broiled to carry with them.

Gorl had been studying Darby and had decided the Southerner should receive a surgeon's attention as early as possible. As he finished eating he abruptly announced his willingness to start immediately for the North Platte. But Darby was obdurate and fiercely insisted, "We've gone through too much to quit without the gold. It's cost the life of as white a man as ever lived. It may cost mine, but I might as well be dead as to go back broke. Besides, we're almost within reach of it. My arm won't kill me if it waits a bit?" The last to the plainsman.

Pride in his ability to give first treatmen to such hurts compelled Fevernager to admit, "Fort surgeon can't do much better for you then I've done. But I ain't lost no gold. I'm keen to be ridin' south."

"Bring up the horses. We ride north," said Darby.

"We'll see nothin' of th' Dakotas," assured Fevernager. "'Less it's a new band, comin' down from th' north. Black Shield's been treated too harsh to fetch us another fight. He started south th' minute we scooted into the cañon. This country is too big medicine for him."

The few miles to the lodge-pole camp was covered without any alarms. A skunk held them down to a walk by leisurely following the trail ahead of them. Fevernager politely greeted a timber wolf, suddenly appearing at the edge of a growth. He respected the animal as did the red man. Like some of them he would not wear a robe of wolf skins because the wolf sometimes goes mad and carries a terrible death in his poisonous teeth.

Fevernager swung off his horse in front of the rude shelter of the pole-cutters and directed his friends to remain in the trail, their guns ready. "If Injuns come we can't run for it. We must stand 'em off, or go down fightin'. There's no Thunder dream to give us a show th' next time," he warned. Then he slowly entered the growth back of the camp. He believed he was inviting the hostility of jealous gods. He would have preferred a brush with a band of Dakotas. Approaching the versatility of an angry medicine he picked his way carefully. The genius of the place might strike him through a rattlesnake, or by dropping a lodged tree to break his back. Lightning was but one of the dangers to guard against.

It took him ten minutes to cover fifty feet of easy travel, and then he halted at the sight of two buffalo skulls on a fallen log. The hollow orbits were encircled with red and were staring into the mysterious east, the home of the fire god. Taking great care not to disturb the two skulls the plainsman rapidly dug into the dead leaves and bark and dirt beneath the log and exhumed four bags made of blankets. Pulling these out he estimated each would weigh about fifty pounds. As he came out at the back of the lean-to with the first bag Darby heard him, and anxiously cried:

"Find it?"

"Reckon so. Found bags. Four of 'em. Not cur'ous to peek into 'em. You two keep where you be till I've finished."

He went back and brought another bag, and still moving with great care as he realized the medicine of the land would surely strike if displeased by his touching the gold. When he reached the back of the lean-to he saw Gorl kneeling by the first bag and about to open it. In a terrible rage the plainsman told him:

"Git back to hoss, where you belong, or this stuff never leaves the hills."

"I just wanted to make sure——"

"Git to hell out of here! Doubting a dead boy's word, eh? Thinkin' he was makin' up a story, an' him dead along o' this stuff!"

Gorl hastily retreated and mounted his horse. The plainsman, muttering profanely, continued with his work. When he had brought the fourth bag to the camp he told his companions:

" 'Bout two hundred pounds as close as I can figger by th' heft. Now my medicine tells me th' best way out o' these hills is th' quickest. We'll start for th' cañon at once an' push through, Injuns or no Injuns. If I've got any medicine mad it'll have to strike while we're up here."

"Two hundred pounds!" softly exclaimed Darby. "If anywhere near clean it'll run near to sixty thousand dollars!"

Gorl began, "If by taking a roundabout way we can make more sure of saving the gold——"

"You'll do derned well to make sure of savin' your hide," savagely broke in the plainsman. "I'm slingin' two bags across my hoss an' hoofin' it. Gorl, you can do th' same."

THE return journey was commenced and finished at that slow pace. Two men were anxiously speculating on the value of the four bags; one man was considering them as worse than a hindrance. He was remembering that white men's bones had rested on them, and he was fearing the wrath of the hills. He was continually watching the heavens and listening for the muttering of thunder. But the Horsemen were not riding that morning, and the cañon was gained and finally traversed without incident. When the three men emerged from the cañon the first thing they saw were four burros feeding near what was a battlefield the preceding day. The plainsman's eyes lighted up, and he cried:

"Wakantanka favors us! We shall have no trouble. He sends us the fourth burrer for th' fourth bag. You white men take notice this is a very strong medicine. There is th' burrer Baltimore took north to fetch back th' gold. Th' critter didn't come with him to this camp when he sneaked among the sleepers night 'fore last. Now he's here, and we didn't meet him."

"Baltimore left him behind after hiding the bags. The burro took his time in finding his way out. He was grazing, or resting back from the trail when we went through the cañon. He came out here when we were up to the lodge-pole camp," Darby explained.

"That's th' white way of figgerin'. To me it's *wakan*. Four bags an' only three burrers. One of 'em could carry all, of course. But four's a sacred number. That's why nothin' happened while we was in th' hills. Now we have four burrers. It's a medicine number. Nothing happened till Baltimore took one away then we was caught. Now it's four ag'in, an' I reckon we're safe ag'in."

Gorl was not interested in this superstition. His gaze had been wandering while Fevernager talked. He turned to the plainsman and asked, "But where are the Indians we shot?"

"Packed away on hosses. Think Injuns leave their dead scattered 'round loose?"

"But Baltimore?" murmured Darby, his eyes clouding. "We must find him and give him a decent burial. I hope the reds haven't mutilated him."

"We'll find him with only the hurts that killed him," said Fevernager. As he spoke he ranged his keen gaze up and down the creek. Suddenly he pointed to the west and said, "He's there. Where ye see three trees growing close together."

"I see the mound. They've buried him," whispered Gorl.

"You're right, an' you're wrong," said Fevernager. "Well, he made a good finish. An' the Dakotas gave him credit for it."

Dumping the bags on the ground the three men rode down the creek. Gorl, who was slightly ahead, exclaimed on nearing the trees, "Fooled. It isn't a grave. It's only a dead horse. Thought it was a grave."

Darby cried out, "It's Baltimore's horse! They even killed his poor horse!"

"Th' grave is in th' tops o' them trees," informed Fevernager.

Their gaze was directed upward. Almost concealed in the new foliage they could make out a long dark object resting on the spreading branches. The dead horse, killed by a bullet, had red dots of paint on his head and legs. Near the horse were three buffalo skulls, daubed with red and blue paint.

Fevernager stared with pride, despite his sorrow, at this display of respect for the dead. He told his companions, "They give him a fine send-off. They look on him as a chief. There is his war pony, which he's ridin' now in th' Land o' many *tipis*. I'm goin' to skin up an' say good-by for all of us. You're unfit for climbin' with that busted arm, Darby. You're too hog-fat, Gorl."

With the agility of a much younger man the plainsman mounted to where the narrow support of saplings was lashed securely to the crotch of one tree and to the stout limb of another. Through tears he gazed on the face of his friend. It did not impress him as being barbarous that face, neck and hands were painted red with vermilion. The body was wrapped tightly in blankets and securely bound with rawhide rope. Above the blankets protruded the wildcat robe of the Shoshone killer. At the feet, and secured to the winding cords was Black Dog's medicine shirt. As the plainsman rested his hands on the silent form for a moment he felt the two revolvers buckled around the waist. With a deep sigh he murmured:

"They did right, son, to call you chief, to bury you like a chief. It'll be a long day afore th' winter lodges stop hearin' how you went down fightin'. It'll be many a long day afore they quit rememberin' how you sent that skunk Black Dog on ahead."

Then, that his friend might have something of his to remember him by, he added his tobacco pouch and knife to the various small articles which were secured to the scaffold.

When he rejoined his friends his voice was filled with pride as he told them, "They buried him as a great chief. They done him all the honor any breed of folks can show a great warrior. But this place is very *wakan*. We must pull out afore harm befalls us."

They galloped back to the burros, after waving a last farewell to the dead, and they made short work of packing the bags on the sturdy animals. While doing this Fevernager opened a bag and examined the contents for a moment, and then announced, "More'n thirty thousand dollars for each of you." But he refused to let them make a like examination, saying it would bring bad luck. He could do so with impunity because he was not to share in the gold. Then they rode south for the North Platte.

CUSTER and his men were six days dead when General Crook climbed high in the Big Horn Mountains and scanned the country below, from the Little Big Horn on his left to the Pumpkin Buttes on his right, without discovering any sign of the forces of either Terry or Gibbon. The plains were alive with jubilant warriors and it was dangerous for stage coach or wagon train to make for the Black Hills.

Cheyenne's importance had greatly diminished as the railroad crawled deeper into the West. Now it was a roaring town again because of the rush to the Black Hills. Lee Darby, on this July day in 1876, found it difficult to recognize the place as he slowly walked along its bustling streets. What had been raw beginnings when he took his little fortune south to achieve his ambition of a Louisiana home and wife and family, were now firmly established as routine by eight years of development. The Black Hills strikes had revived trade and made Cheyenne the most important outfitting station. Other sections of the country were endeavoring to lure the adventurous. The Central Pacific posters were shrieking:

Ho! For California!!!
The Laborer's Paradise!

More quietly the Union Pacific placards were enveigling:

Rich Farming Lands!

The Southern Pacific reached out for pioneers with the bold slogan:

Choice of 9,000,000 Acres.

But none of these appeals could hold the interest in a gold-mad country. Greater attention was paid to the Union Pacific's big type, proclaiming:

To the Gold Fields of the Black Hills!

For the town and the country thought and talked in terms of rich diggings, tremendous bonanzas, lodes of gold, hills of gold, placid creeks flowing between nugget-riddled banks. In the streets, the homes, the saloons and the hotels there was little besides gold to be heard in all the clamorous talk. There was one fly in the ointment since white men forced their way into the *Mato Tipi* country; Crazy Horse and his warriors had taken the field to block the roads. Custer had been killed and the town did not know it as yet. Crook was planning to march to the relief of the hill towns, but all that was happening north of the Platte would be slow in filtering down to Cheyenne.

The Southerner was not to be lured away from the content of his Louisiana home. Business had called him to Denver, and a sudden desire to revisit the scenes of his brick-making and other activities had drawn him to the magic city. His wondering gaze was being rewarded by substantial and handsome houses, large stores, well-equipped hotels, and a street activity that surpassed that of the boom days in one important particular: life was orderly.

Stage coaches, the Indians permitting, were following the route he and his friends took in their quest for gold under young Baltimore's leadership. From maps of the gold fields prominently displayed he knew Custer City stood on French Creek, near the spot where he and Gorl had hauled dirt from the dry diggings to be washed. He saw long trains of wagons camping in the streets. It was only a year before that the first bull train of three wagons had started for the hills from in front of Ford's Inter-Ocean Hotel on Hill and 16th Streets. Wherever he walked he heard only talk of the hills.

It aroused no desire to hunt again for gold. It merely reminded him of Red Cañon, and the tree grave of the man who had died like a chief and had been buried with red honors. He had one particular errand, and that finished he would be impatient to start back home. He turned into Erasmus Nagel's grocery at Ferguson and 17th Streets and captured a very busy clerk long enough to ask:

"Where does Allan Gorl live?"

"Gorl? You mean the big rancher. Goes in for fancy stock. Also has a big outfitting place on Horse Creek. Yes, sir. What do you wish?" And he was off to fill another order. This one store was selling five thousand dollars' worth of goods each day.

It was all so different from the quiet life he had been living for eight years that

Darby soon discovered the bustle and commotion tired him physically. There was a glimmer of interest as a loud-voiced man declared Red Cloud was off his reservation to carry a war pipe against all whites. It was the name and not what the owner might be doing that interested the Southerner. Once more he was glimpsing Makhpia-sha and was hearing Fevernager address him. Reconstruction of the South and his great happiness had crowded much from his mind, but now fragments of life on Crow Creek were coming back. He wondered when and how the old plainsman had finished. Fevernager had refused to accept any of the gold, saying it was *wakan*. Originally dug up by white men and guarded by their bones, it had proved a blessing to the Southerner, and, according to the grocery clerk, it had stood Gorl on his feet. This recalled to mind his successful endeavors in securing the vigilance committee's consent for Gorl to settle down near Cheyenne on a small ranch. Now Darby was repaid for all his efforts. The Easterner apparently had made good.

He visited the scene of his brick-making and found it covered with buildings. He saw one of J. C. Abnay's stage coaches pull out, crowded with eager gold hunters and destined to be held up at Fort Laramie because of the red menace. Hoshier and Cinnamond, proprietors of the second line, running via Red Cloud Agency, were carrying passengers as far as the North Platte with the remainder of the journey depending on the latest news from north of the river. This road was settled up to the Platte, and Abnay's route would pass through settled country for the first hundred miles. And all this expansion within a period of eight years. While eating in Dyer's restaurant on Eddy Street he heard a proposed rail connection with the Black Hills discussed as something already assured of early accomplishment. A railroad where the patient burros had packed in the rocker and packed out the gold! And the three trees and young Baltimore's aerial grave. Probably destroyed by whites. . . .

Hiring a horse, he rode eighteen miles to Fred Schwartz' ranch on Pole Creek and stopped for the night. Early in the morning he started for Fagin's ranch, ten miles away and was almost continually passing long bull trains. At Fagin's, on Horse Creek, he was informed he must travel another three miles to reach Gorl's ranch. Gorl was a big man, a coming man, he was informed. He seemed to understand stock. His outfitting place was taking in big money. Gorl could climb high in Wyoming's public life if he would leave his ranch and seek political honors.

Now Darby rode more slowly, for the prospect of soon seeing the Easterner was sharply stirring his memory. It was almost the only time he ever sought Gorl without hurrying to extricate him from some difficulty.

When he sighted the long, low ranch-house he slipped from the saddle and walked slowly. On his right, and quite near the road, a small canvas tent attracted his attention because of its odd appearance. The canvas was wrapped around lodge poles and gave the shape and appearance of a Dakota *tipi*. A small boy, wearing a war bonnet of feathers plucked from domestic fowls, raced around the tent and with a shrill war whoop ducked through the low opening. Darby halted when a quavering voice from inside the tent commenced singing the old song.

"I can't begin to count my gold,
But a feller did that knows,
It took a heap o' figgers,
And I think they all was O's;
Then O's is pretty figgers,
But then it seems to foller,
That when a figger's circular
It's so etarnal holler."

The treble of a child joined in the chorus and Darby cleared his throat and shouted in unison:

"Oh, Californy,
You're not *the land for me,*
I've been an' left the washbowl,
I had upon my knee."

A bowed head, covered with a shock of white hair and belonging to a bowed figure, erupted from the tent and ran with limping steps toward Darby. As the old man advanced his hand shaded his eyes from the sun. Suddenly he tossed up both hands and screamed:

"Gawdfrey mighty! *Kola! Kola!"* And both hands were eagerly outstretched as he completed the distance to the road. When the two had returned to coherent speech Fevernager explained:

"Yep. I live with 'em. This young chief behind me is Baltimore Gorl. There's a Lee Darby Gorl at the ranch. They'd named the little girl for me if it only had been a boy an' I'd had a name. Lawd! To think of it all! The three of us rode back! That dream wa'n't no slouch. Even to this day Allan keeps askin' if I opine his dream o' rattlers caused all th' trouble. Young Kensler was hung in Cheyenne two years back. Murdered a man."

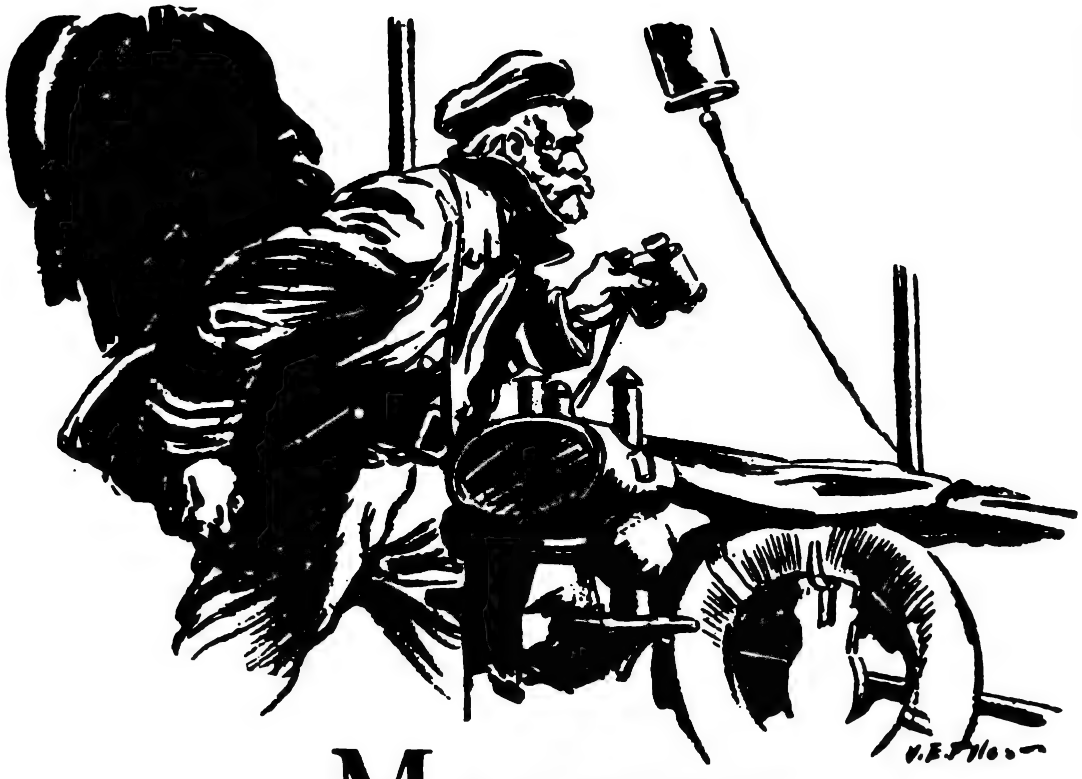
"Allan married? Allan's children," muttered Darby.

"Married th' little Spanish girl. She's too dang religious, but she's all right. Won't let me teach th' little gal any o' my songs. But young Baltimore here stays along o' me much o' th' time. He can shoot a bow'n arrer most bodacious. Swears a little bit, too, when his ma ain't 'round. Allan's made lot o' money. Has a *wakan* way with stock. Does a big outfittin' business. Does big things in a big way. But if I was eighty years younger 'n' this young chief didn't have to be brought up I couldn't stand it. Too tame. It's hard for me to slip into town for a little rinktum without him ridin' after an' fetchin' me back. His missus come in an' snaked me home once when he was away on business. Buffler fast goin' to hell. Houses goin' up everywhere. Well, let's go on to th' house. You'll be seein' 'em soon. Hark! That's th' little Spaniard singing' one o' her religious tunes."

Darby halted and removed his hat. It was what the Mormon dance-hall girl sang when dying. Strawberry Sam, Elder Keen, the simple, the unfortunate, the bad; they were all around him in the dusty road.

"The spirit of God like a fire is burning,
The latter day glory begins to come forth,
The visions and blessings of old are returning,
The angels are coming to visit the earth."

THE END



MASTERY

A Tale of Feud on Stormy Oceans

By HENRY LaCOSSITT

THE *Eagle* flew northward. For almost two days she had held the same course. Nearly forty-eight hours before she had watched the buildings of Alexandria fade away and seen the sandy Egyptian coast sink into the sea. And all this time she had been alone on the sea—alone save for a tiny speck on the southern horizon. Propeller blades, slightly showing, churned furiously, spewing lathery foam in white arcs aft the ship, which was loaded lightly with a cargo of Egyptian figs. Twelve nozzles she steamed, supposedly her top speed, for her gauges said that above that was dangerous. And with but a slight swell running—and that behind—she was doing well.

No list. Even and high on the water sat the *Eagle,* shiningly black, with clean decks, spick masts and booms, and dun funnels newly painted. But an ordinary well-decked freighter of no great size, she appeared, at times, almost graceful, a symbol of speed; but then that, perhaps, was due to the Mediterranean, or the sky, or the glistening bow wave.

On her flying bridge, alternately looking ahead, and scanning, through a pair of worn binoculars, the speck on the southern horizon, stood her skipper, Eric Strand. He was a very large man; but not a very pleasant-looking man. The wheelsman did not think so; neither did the rest of the crew. Nor did they confine that opinion to looks. They thought Eric Strand was not a very pleasant man, which, indeed, he wasn't. But perhaps that was not, altogether, his fault.

Really, he was more than large: He was gross. This impression was heightened by his uniform, which never fit him well. He had tremendous hands and feet and very long arms that had, more than once on the voyage, evinced a power that proved almost fatal to one ordinary seaman who had been so bold as to differ with Eric on a matter of paint. And, although Eric never rolled up his sleeves, his crew knew those arms were uglily strong. The fit of his coat told that. The sleeves were short, in the first place, and the shoulders were a little tight. But his head and face were the chief offenders, for Eric was not—decidedly not—handsome.

His chin was truculently and prominently square. And it was usually unshaven, although the noon he sailed, the stubble was absent—for Eric had had dealings with Egyptian pilots. The mouth was straight and too small; the nose was long and slightly hooked; the eyes were sunken and little and brilliantly hard, and they had grown very close together as if Eric were afraid something might penetrate between them. Which would never do, for Eric had his own ideas about things.

The forehead had nothing about it to mark it, in particular, except that it was rather low, and Eric's ears seemed to have been pounded into his skull. This was huge and shaggy, and the mop of hair that grew thereon was combed only on occasions, one of which was the same noon he had shaved. But it had, by now, again lapsed into jungly profusion, and fringed beneath his dirty cap.

People usually said Eric was repulsive; certainly there was nothing physically attractive about him, but if they had looked more closely they would have been fascinated. For in his face lay a suggestion of power. To some who were analytical, this suggestion might have been fascinating because it presented a study of misguided energy, and the crew, although they never had pondered deeply the subject, felt the fascination. For the suggestion of power never, within their subconscious memories, had left his face, and probably would not, for them, as no crew ever shipped twice with Eric.

The wheelsman, holding the course Eric had marked in chalk on the blackboard behind him, felt that subtle fascination as the *Eagle* flew northward, bound for Samos. Eric, perhaps, felt it, for his power was asserting itself. He looked ahead once more and then went out of the wheelhouse to the end of the bridge to focus his binoculars on the speck that grew no larger on the southern horizon. That caused Eric's mouth to unbend a bit and form a species of grin.

The speck was a ship and that ship was the *Dolphin*, captained by Charley Goodwin. Charley was Eric's first cousin and was bound for Samos also, but Eric meant to be there before him. Hence the speed of the *Eagle*.

Kinship was not the only bond that should have held Eric and Charley in amity, and didn't. They were both tramp captains, two of the few remaining of that once large brotherhood who pretended to any opulence and influence. They had grown up on the sea, cutting their teeth, as it were, on belaying pins. On sailing vessels, on fishing smacks, on steamers, they had served long and arduous apprenticeships. They had wandered the lanes of oceans from 'Frisco to Cape Town; from Oslo to Rio. Like their fathers they had spurned organizations and become free lances, going where trade took them, sniffing cargo on the salt wind. They were, now, occupied with the rapidly rising American trade in the Mediterranean. For the *Eagle* and the *Dolphin* both flew the flag of the States. But between the captains burned feud.

It began with their fathers. Brothers-in-law, they owned, first, a brigantine, and from its dock in Staten Island, where they lived side by side, they sailed for years, pooling their earnings, fighting mutual battles, living mutual lives. The brigantine gave way to a steamship and the partnership continued.

They got on, doing well, and built fairly large fortunes. Their sons came and were put to sea early, after educations that ended with high school. But with added years, the friendship soured. Not only did it sour; it grew to hate through fancied wrongs, until the partnership flew to pieces. Hate grew to fury, until the wives—sisters—broke under it and died, to be followed not long after by their husbands. But before they died Captains Strand and Goodwin left their heritage.

On his deathbed old Mark Strand called Eric and gaspingly admonished him.

"Son," he said, "no ship can have two masters. It's a single proposition, and don't forget it. Mastery's everything. After it's gone, nothing matters. Jim Goodwin tried to master me; don't let his spawn master you." And so on until gloomy old Mark—who was the principal reason for Eric's unpleasantness—talked himself into the grave. Jim Goodwin told Charley about the same thing.

Now if Eric had had a sense of humor all this might have been laughable, although pitiable. But he hadn't. Humor was something Eric lacked, and, besides, he held a very definite grudge against Charley. For Eric saw Charley laugh; saw him attract people; saw him popular when they were schoolmates; saw him thoroughly lovable and therefore, to Eric, thoroughly hatable. So Charley, who had a sense of humor—which was something else Eric held against him—found an enemy at every turn.

Although he and Charley were utterly free of each other, Eric fought. He hounded Charley, cut at his trade, worried and annoyed at each opportunity, until Charley, goaded to exasperation, though highly amused, turned and struck back. The spawn of Jim Goodwin cast his die, and in earnest.

Now they were racing to Samos.

II

THE *Eagle* and the *Dolphin* had discharged flour at Alexandria. Upon their arrival there, old Stanislaus Arundopolis sent his radio.

Charley first had dug into trade at Samos—a rich tobacco trade that paid big freight money. For two trips he enjoyed an exclusive right to it and then Eric heard about it. And the next trip Charley made eastward, he learned, when he touched at Beirut, that the cargo had been shipped and that the *Eagle* had carried it.

Old Arundopolis had a sense of humor, if Eric had not. And when he saw the gross and gloomy skipper of the *Eagle* in a sweat about the matter, he investigated. It was no secret and he learned of the rivalry. So, to have his little joke, he informed both Eric and Charley that the tobacco, in the future, would go to the one who reached Samos first, saying, if they would radio him when within striking distance, that he would radio back if he had the cargo. And he always had it. Eric accepted because he was stubborn; Charley enjoyed it.

Three times old Arundopolis had radioed and twice Eric had won. But on the voyage before, Charley, lying at No. 16 pier in Alexandria, with Eric at No. 5, had slipped over some night work, and, with five hours start, won handily. This time, however, Eric had worked mightily night and day and had a two hour start. Standing on the bridge with the species of grin unbending his mouth, he gloated. He seemed bound to win handily this time.

Seven bells, the *Dolphin* was no nearer, and Eric, complacent, his hard eyes triumphant, went down to lunch. For once, thought the mates and engineers, he was almost congenial. He even passed a joke now and then, at which the table laughed, albeit somewhat sickly. And he asked a messman to present his compliments to the steward, at which the gasps that followed were plainly audible. Truly, Eric was in good humor.

So good was his humor, seemingly, that the chief engineer decided to talk matters over with him. The ship was running short of water, and, as Nile River water was desirable neither for boilers nor stomachs, they had been unable to get any at Alexandria. Likewise, they would be able to get none at Samos. But if they could put in at Piræus—say—they could stock up with Athens water, which was quite all right. Well, that could be handled easily, the chief was informed, as they had some Egyptian figs for Saloniki, and would, probably, pick up some coastwise trade. But, to Eric, this problem of boilers was rather acute. Would the chief have a cigar, and what did he think of it? The chief would, and expatiated on boilers, as Eric took laborious notes in a large and uncouth hand. With the boiler question settled, Eric looked at a chronometer, which hung in the ship's office—to where they had repaired—and saw that it was three bells.

Recalling, suddenly, the race and poor Charley, two hours behind in his *Dolphin*, Eric, giving laconic orders to the chief, and shouting to the first mate who was telling two ordinaries in no uncertain terms how to batten down No. 3 hatch, swung outside and ascended to the bridge.

Boilers, thought he, were needed all right, but they cost money. At which Eric sighed; for money, perhaps, was his only sentimentality. But boilers, he figured, could be paid for with money from the tobacco. So many tons at such a rate, let him see, would——

His figuring stopped abruptly. He jerked his binoculars to his eyes and swept the horizon aft the ship. Then he laughed, which was an event to a deckboy painting a rail near by. No speck was in sight. The *Dolphin*, evidently, was back, way, way back——

Again he stopped abruptly. Something

to port and forward caught the corner of his eye. He whirled. Again he jerked his binoculars to his eyes. And there, a good two knots ahead, steaming merrily along, he saw the *Dolphin!*

Eric stood stunned. Then he started violently as if he had touched a live wire. He tore into the wheelhouse. He looked at the blackboard. The course was still as he marked it—337. He looked at the compass. His bellow caused the wheelsman, who had relieved at noon, to release his grip; the second mate to stand rooted. For the wheelsman was steering 357, which would run the *Eagle* into the Turkish coast if it were followed.

"You rat!" shrieked Eric, and grabbed the wheelsman, and the subtle suggestion in his face—that of tremendous misguided energy—became obvious. A blow struck the offender to the floor, where he cowered until Eric reached down, grabbed him by the collar, and jerked him erect. One of Eric's huge hands pointed a tremendous and bony finger at each of the three numbers as his shaking voice read them aloud.

"But I—I thought it was a five, not a three," wailed the wheelsman.

"It's a three—a three—a *three!*" Eric's hoarseness burst into a roar. He flailed the wheelsman across the face with his free hand, bringing his long arm's full power down with the blow. The man dropped heavily, his nose crushed, his lips bleeding, unconscious.

"I know," continued Eric, once more in a husky voice. "I wrote it myself!" And the huskiness again rose in a roaring crescendo.

He kicked the wheelsman aside. He jerked the wheel around and started the *Eagle* after the fleeing *Dolphin*.

"And you!" he shouted to the still rooted second mate. "You keep this course and, by God, if you vary a second I'll brain you!"

Which, the second had no doubt, he would.

Leaving the mate gripping the wheel, Eric, after fuming over a deaf-and-dumb speaking tube which stubbornly resisted his efforts to transmit any message to the chief, rushed out of the wheelhouse and descended rapidly to that officer's quarters. The chief, basking in the glow of friendly conversation with Eric and soothed by the fragrant cigar, was in a pleasant after-lunch doze whose subject was a red-headed Roumanian girl at the King George in Saloniki, when the gross mass of his skipper hurtled unannounced through his screen door.

He looked in amazemnet as the hard mouth, distorted, issued hissing sound, as the hooked nose quivered grotesquely, as the hard eyes shot steel from the shaggy head.

"What're we steaming?" demanded Eric.

"Twelve nozzles," said the chief.

"Can we stand more with these boilers?"

"Well—uh——"

"Hell! Can we?"

"Yes, but it's not safe."

"Safe be damned! Strain her. Blow her up, but, by God, make more knots!"

To the bridge, then, to glower at the streaking *Dolphin* and glower at the second, whose eyes were attached to the compass.

The afternoon wore away and the *Eagle's* engines groaned and screamed as it strained to catch the *Dolphin*. Thirteen knots, now—thirteen hard, steaming, agonizing knots—and the *Dolphin* began to lose. Inch by inch the *Eagle* crept closer, its black prow pointed at the stern of its quarry like a vengeful beak.

Sunset over the sea, sending the beautiful blue through lovely changes, as they picked up land to starboard. And still the *Eagle* crept closer, closer, closer, ever so slowly, but surely, until it seemed as if its black hull would burst with the effort. Night came and the aft mast-lights of the *Dolphin* were just ahead, coming closer—but so, now, were the lights of Vathi, tiny port of Samos.

Eric was at the wheel, now. He muttered. The *Dolphin* was a scant distance ahead, but the heights of Samos loomed against the stars now, and buildings began to rise behind the lights. The sprinkling of white houses up the escarpments of the low mountains emerged from the shadows as if powdery snow had just fallen, and the *Dolphin* entered the little bay of Vathi.

Still Eric hung on. But as he made a last desperate effort to overtake his rival, an effort that, in his rage maddened brain, included ramming, he saw a small craft pull alongside the *Dolphin*.

He had lost. It was the launch of old man Arundopolis.

III

SUNSHINE surged up the eastern side of the mountains and overflowed, rushing down in golden brilliance on the bay which became alive with dancing gold notes. Tiny Vathi stirred sleepily and blinked at the light. The heights emerged from shadows, and, like tremendous hives, gave off an atmosphere of buzzing activity. Morning sounds sped over the water. A cock crowed; a winch clattered; a man shouted.

Aboard the *Eagle,* lying at anchor in the bay, activity began apace with the day. Yawning men in dungarees and undershirts emerged from companionways and lit cigarets, to stand and stare at the water, at the mountains, at the sky, at themselves. They stared meditatively, contemplatively, as if something were to be done about everything. But they gave it up and inhaled.

A white-coated messman, carrying a steaming bucket of oatmeal from the cook's galley, set it down in the officers' mess pantry and half fearfully—because, in the forecastle, lay a groaning shipmate with a mutilated face—climbed a steep flight of stairs. At the top he turned and knocked gently, then more violently. It was all right, he was told.

Eric sat up in bed, his narrow eyes blinking in stupid wakefulness. And hateful wakefulness, because, at the precise moment he issued a grunting sigh, a strident clamor screamed over the water—the *Dolphin's* winches hoisting tobacco bales.

He ate breakfast in gloom, which was clearly manifest to the other occupants of the saloon. They hurried through their meal, casting covert glances at each other, and covert and furtive glances at him. Then they left carefully, quietly, for the narrow eyes said the gloom was not tranquil.

Which it was not. Within he seethed. Bitterness possessed him, overwhelmed him, a sinister bitterness that seared his closely packed heart, and skewered his narrow mind. No room between his eyes for it to seep out and lose itself in the beautiful Samian morning, and it turned back on itself, and Eric squirmed. Several times he started from his seat, only to drop back as a sense of helpfulness overcame him, which goaded the bitterness to futile fury. The table was cleared before him, but still he sat.

No balm that cargoes, rich ones, probably waited at Smyrna, at Saloniki, at Sicily, and were his for the asking; Charley was loading tobacco at Samos—and through the stupidity of a wheelsman. At that thought, which recurred whenever the hectic stream of Eric's mental ragings reached a certain point in their circle, he started, trembling, from his seat. He considered further chastisement for the offender, but the helpless futility of it occurred to him.

And Charley, likely, would gloat—gloat and laugh—laugh and talk—talk and ridicule. By God, he'd——

Eric rose and started for the door. He was not exactly sure what he intended doing, but the face was murderous, and in the back of his mind was an idea that he was going to the *Dolphin.* But he was halted, suddenly, by a soft voice that hailed him from the other door of the saloon.

"Capitaine."

Eric turned. In the door stood Arundopolis, his wrinkled Oriental features grimacing with amusement. Behind him stood a spurious sort of person, who also smiled, and bowed at the precise moment and at the precise angle as did Arundopolis. Eric controlled himself. Rather his native shrewdness controlled him, for Arundopolis represented money. The Greek addressed him.

"Good morning, *Capitaine,*" he said in choppy English. "I am veree glad to see you. Also, I am veree sorree that you lose, but eet was good race, no?"

Eric guessed it was.

"Thees," said Arundopolis, "ees Meestaire Taufi, who will conduct my affairs from now on. I am going to Athens."

Eric was immediately interested. Also he was very glad to know Mister Taufi, who spoke perfect English, being fresh from a British bank in Port Said, and who looked as if he were worth knowing.

He was much younger than Arundopolis, and his sharp-featured and predatory face was a mask to intrigue the outraged Eric, who was heartily sick of races to Samos. Perhaps Mr. Taufi was amenable to reason. Perhaps, through Mr. Taufi, who smiled knowingly, he might wrest this trade from Charley.

When that gentleman left with Arundopolis—who all through the conversation looked at Eric as he might at a cat chasing its tail—he asked if he might have the pleasure of Eric's company that evening. This, Eric took as favorable, and replied that he would be more than pleased.

Consequently, as the first shadows of the darkening mountains were staining the bay with deep purple, Eric, shaved, his hair combed, and in his ill-fitting coat with the master's stripes on the sleeves, descended the accommodation ladder and put out for shore in a skiff sculled by a turbaned levantine. He vouchsafed one look at the *Dolphin* and saw Charley, who smiled and waved at him, and thereafter eschewed all the landscape in that direction.

NOW Mr. Taufi was a canny Greek. In all his career, which had been, to say the least, rather checkered, he had never met anyone quite so delightful as Eric. Eric, as he explained to his very fat wife that evening before dinner, gesturing with a narrow and wiry hand as he did so, was one of those people who would aid them in their plans to winter in Paris each year.

When Eric arrived, Mr. Taufi was seated on a divan, an enormous narghile before him, the stem of which he stroked gently as drew bubbly smoke to his mouth. His tarboosh pointed at Eric as he arose and waved the captain to a chair. They ate, shortly afterward, and then Mrs. Taufi retired to let her astute husband get on with his schemes for wintering in Paris.

But first Mr. Taufi caused another narghile to be brought and set before Eric and also caused two demijohns, one filled with *masteecha* and the other with rich Samos wine, to be set on the small table between them. When these three had been partaken of by Eric, Mr. Taufi began.

"You do not like to lose," he said, but with a smile that rent his face and allowed his bright teeth to gleam in the lamplight.

Eric looked up sharply. But he understood—Mr. Taufi was beginning.

"No."

"No one does, *Capitaine*, and you need not lose. You can win—you can master Goodwin easily." For Mr. Taufi had been talked to by Arundopolis.

"I'd have won this time, only I had an accident."

"Yes, yes, *Capitaine*, but accidents happen, you know, and may happen again."

He paused. It seemed plausible to Eric.

"But how would you like"—leaning forward—"to make accidents impossible, at least as far as you and Goodwin are concerned?"

"How'd I like to! Why I'd like to run him off this trade. I'd like to break him, damn him! I'd like——"

"This trade only, *Capitaine?*" interrupted Mr. Taufi. "This trade only? Would you not like to run him off the sea?"

"The sea! Hell yes, but I couldn't do that—could I?"

Eric was leaning forward now. He was tense, his narrow eyes agleam, and Mr. Taufi regarded him with a sadistic smile. The winters in Paris were not going to be hard ones. He leaned back and placed his fingertips together as he regarded the ceiling. He was silent for a moment. Then he spoke, very deliberately and softly.

"Suppose, *Capitaine*, that something were to happen to him and his ship; something that would bring down international law against him, that would cause his ship to be confiscated, cause him to be arrested, thrown in prison, discredited—ruined?"

Eric listened intently as he sat on the edge of his chair.

"Suppose," continued Mr. Taufi smoothly, "that in—say—a thousand bales of tobacco were placed small containers of opium. Suppose you lose the next race. Suppose the *Dolphin* wins. Suppose I obtain a cargo for him in Spain and he leaves here bound for a Spanish port with that contraband. And then suppose Spanish customs authorities receive a radio concerning that cargo. I am cleared. I have influence and can deny, and Greek customs officials will affirm the denial, but *Capitaine* Goodwin——"

Mr. Taufi snapped his fingers as he threw up a wiry hand and leaned back to draw on his narghile.

Now Eric was not a crook. He had neither the imagination nor the courage to be crooked, but he was not without capacity for evil and malicious mischief, especially if it were sure not to react against him. And into his inflamed mind the fullness of Mr. Taufi's meaning burst like a blinding light.

He perspired. Blood coursed furiously through his heavy face, and his eyes blazed in unholy joy. Here was the way—the way to annihilate the spawn of Jim Goodwin forever. Here was the way to tear that aggravating smile from Charley's face.

"Yes," he gasped. "We'll do it. You pack the dope, I'll send the radio. I'll——"

Mr. Taufi's gesture cut him short. The Greek eased forward, palms up, his shoulders in stiffened shrug. Eric stared, waiting.

"*Baksheesh?*" Smooth and soft through a smile it issued, but Eric had thought of that.

"How much?" he asked quickly, and was told.

Hurriedly he fumbled in his pocket and procured his checkbook. His trembling hands wrote out the amount, drawn on a New York bank, and he left minutes later, to rush through the narrow streets of Vathi to the waterfront, dazed with excitement.

In his upper room Mr. Taufi, dragging slowly at his narghile, studied the ceiling as his wiry hands stroked the crease in Eric's check for $10,000.

IV

TWO months later the *Eagle* and the *Dolphin* again lay at anchor in Alexandria, discharging automobiles and flour. And it was a surly crew that manned the *Eagle*, for the trip had been trying. Eric was impatient, and more than usually short tempered.

Three times he had laid hands on men and twice they had been forced to organize to get their money when in port. They muttered among themselves and the mates were hard put to handle them. Four had signed off, one had deserted, and, although others had filled the gaps, work on the *Eagle* was done grudgingly and not well.

For Eric, poor soul, was eager to reach Samos. And, being eager to reach Samos, he could not see nearer things clearly. The crew annoyed him; the mates annoyed him; everything annoyed him, and his narrow eyes, gleaming evilly now, became suspiciously circled and cast an unnatural gleam.

Chief among the men that annoyed him was a cockney. This man, wizened and furrowed from years at sea, told his shipmates that Eric was not worth working for; that he was a slave driver; that he was, more or less, a fiend. And, although Eric did not hear of this, the bold attitude of the man made him vaguely uneasy. Twice, Eric had spoken to him, or rather bellowed to him, when the man veiledly flouted authority. But still the cockney wore insolence on his sleeve, and Eric was instinctively aware of it.

With him and several confederates to arouse it, a rising wave of sullen wrath lapped at Eric's feet, as the surly crew waited, with their peculiar skipper, for a message that would send them on a queer voyage.

Meanwhile Mr. Taufi was busy. It had occurred to him, of course, that with Eric's $10,000 in his grasp he might just as well neglect to adulterate the tobacco with more potent narcotics, but it also occurred to him that, if he went through with his end of the bargain, there might be more checks. So he might as well, although he had nothing against Charley. That, of course, had little to do with Mr. Taufi's reasoning.

Across the island from Vathi, at equally tiny Teegani, he superintended personally the packing of a thousand tobacco bales. In the shadow of an ancient Greek city where Pythagoras was born, and whose ruins looked down on Mr. Taufi's labor, the opium was inserted. He had received it from agents in Port Said and, thoroughly cautious as his nature dictated, hidden it in the lonely crags of the Turkish coast which is separated from Samos by a narrow strait. When he heard that Eric and Charley were at Alexandria, the opium had been sculled over in small boats to be buried in the tobacco. He finished one evening at sunset and, driving across the rugged island to Vathi, sent his message to the captains. The thousand bales would be brought over next day and he sat back to await. It was amusing as well as profitable.

Twilight was softening Alexandria when Mr. Taufi's message came crackling into the radio shacks of the *Eagle* and the *Dolphin*. Its soft shadows crept over the old bay and lay hold of ships. Twinkling lights popped out in the ancient city that hummed subduedly in the fading day. Evening slipped into houses, into streets, into souls of shuffling pedestrians and meditating merchants. From somewhere came the distant minors of a weird chant sung to the accompaniment of a single-stringed fiddle.

The subtle influence of hovering night was transmitted to the bay and the crews of ships that lay anchored there, but not to Eric. A lonely figure he paced his bridge. Beneath him, sprawled on a hatch cover were men, watching the magic transition; about him the water changed with the iridescence of a chameleon; above him the sky dropped stars and depended them from deepening blue, but he was oblivious. Samos and beyond held him like the fatal head of a basilisk.

Within him raged turmoil. His bony hands trembled and his step was nervous. The deepening twilight depressed him for, stopping now and then to look at nothing in particular, he was conscious of a spinning feeling in the pit of his stomach. The only alleviative to that spinning feeling was activity, and, grinding his teeth, he would pace again.

He did not see his radio operator cross the main deck and ascend the ladders to the flying bridge. He was not conscious of the man's approach and when he heard a voice accost him his whole being twitched. In the semi-darkness he did not recognize the man and he muttered a curse as he stepped forward. The operator instinctively stepped back a pace for there was, in Eric's attitude, a threat. But Eric recognized him and relaxed, somewhat, only to jerk to rigidity as he realized it might be the message from Samos.

Without a word, but with a husky sound in his throat, he grabbed the message from the operator's hand. Rushing into the wheelhouse he switched on a light. Tremblingly he held the paper and read it with a glint in his hard and slightly glazed eyes. With a shout he burst from the wheelhouse. He blew his whistle.

The first mate appeared. The third mate appeared. The ship's telegraph rang. The men on the hatch sat up, tense, wondering at the hubbub. A boat put out from the ship to procure a pilot.

Uproar broke on the *Eagle*. The engine room stood by, steaming up. Seamen—those who were not commandeered by the first mate—stood in knots talking. They were sailing, and how about those that had gone ashore? There had been no blasts blown; no warning. Surely their skipper, hard as he was, peculiar as he was, would not leave so abruptly without notifying his men. But the rising sound from the engines told them that was what he intended to do.

They delegated the cockney to approach him. Perhaps their "old man" was merely forgetful.

The cockney climbed to the flying bridge and stood at the door to the wheelhouse. Eric was posting the course. He became aware of the man's presence and looked up. He remembered the cool insolence of the Englishman and recognized it now.

"Well?" he challenged.

"We wants to know, sir," said the cockney, his small, wizened face smoking wrath, but controlling his speech, "wot ye plans to do with them blokes wot's ashore. Hit inet reg'lar, sir, in seafarin', to pull hout like this. Hit——"

But Eric was in no mood for this. He stopped the man with a curse that shook the wheelhouse.

"The hell it ain't!" he flung. "Who's running this packet? Get off this bridge, you blasted, little limey, or I'll knock you off!"

But the cockney held his ground. His little eyes blazed as Eric, with two tremendous strides, came face to face with him.

"Ye're a lousy crook!" screamed the cockney. "Ye're a dirty——"

Eric's bludgeonlike fist with the power of his ugly arm driving it rammed further abuse down the protesting man's throat. The cockney fell backward. As he lit, Eric was upon him. The suppressed impatience and turmoil of days vented itself. With the strength of a gorilla he picked up the Englishman, who was struggling dazedly to arise, and carried him to the ladder. With a spiteful swing of his long arms, he hurled the wriggling man down the steep stairs. The cockney struck the steel deck with a dull thud and lay prone, stunned and groaning.

Eric turned to see the quizzical face of an Egyptian pilot.

An hour later the *Eagle* steamed northward. The pilot had been dropped; the course was set. The whine of the engine sounded rhythmically as Eric stood on the bridge, a maniacal look of triumph on his face as he saw the aft mast-lights of the *Dolphin* in the distance.

But this time the *Eagle* did not strain her engines.

V

THE *Eagle* was empty, but Eric did not care. He could afford to lose on this voyage. This was the voyage of triumph, and he stood, one evening, watching the *Dolphin* as it finished loading tobacco. Charley appeared at the rail and laughed and waved as he always did when he saw Eric, but Eric only leered back at him.

Mr. Taufi had called that morning and assured him that all was as planned. This, Mr. Taufi told him, was the last time he would be bothered with the very obnoxious Charley. After this, Mr. Taufi suavely reiterated, Eric would be master.

And Eric was elated. He scarcely noticed his crew or that they cast black looks at him. Even the mates were strangely sullen, but Eric was impervious. Absorbed as he was, he had no time for his men. He almost forgot he was sailing a ship, until he was reminded of it by the *Dolphin,* slowly swinging around, bound out for Spain!

Again activity struck rapidly on the *Eagle,* but Eric waited an hour. Charley was out of sight, then, and the *Eagle* slipped out of Vathi's open bay, again in pursuit. Through the night the two ships steamed and in the morning they passed Cape Matapan, Eric hovering behind just out of sight, but knowing, from the radio signals of the *Dolphin* that she was just ahead. Through the day and through another night and the strange chase kept up. Another day and night and they picked up Sicily.

Ætna loomed in the sunrise, spouting steam, as they changed course to pass the straits. The morning waned and Charley had passed Scylla and swung out into the sea of the ancients—the Tyrheenian. Eric caught sight of the *Dolphin* as he passed Messina, and slowed. When Charley had been lost around Sicily, he again proceeded. Then he sent his radio.

Charley was bound for Barcelona, and to the customs officials there went Eric's message in code, supplied him by Mr. Taufi, telling of the contraband, of the *Dolphin,* of Charley. And as it went, he suppressed a scream of joy.

To the bridge then, where he navigated the straits. As he swung close to Scylla to avoid the seething current of Charybdis, his eye caught a dolphin, leaping in the bow wave. Subconsciously he watched it in its shining arcs and graceful dives, until, from the low ranges of Italy, flew an eagle. The bird soared majestically, coming lower, attracted by the ship. It investigated, at a fair height, and then changed its actions abruptly.

Swift as a plummet it dropped, straight and viciously, at the flashing arcs in the bow wave. Nearer it came, and nearer, and Eric, fascinated in spite of himself, watched. Down the bird swooped, until it struck, in a flapping of wings and flurry of spray, the dolphin.

Weird joy seized Eric as he watched the struggle. The dolphin leaped high, bending backward, as it tried to shake the tearing talons and ripping beak from its back, but the eagle stuck. Like a streak, then, the dolphin swam ahead of the ship, writhing, leaping, wriggling; but the eagle remained. Back again, thrashing against the ship they came, and Eric, his hands gripping the rail, watched them, his breath in gasps, his gleaming eyes dilated, his face deeply flushed.

But the bird was having a hard time. It strove continually to rise, but the dolphin's weight forced it down each time it left the water. Bloody, the surface about the ship, as the dolphin cut it in circles, faster and faster, and then—deeper. The eagle spread its wings in a mighty effort, but the dolphin dived and they beat against the water. But this dive continued; the fish was in its own element. The head of the bird weaved with effort, the beak opened in a terrible scream, and then disappeared.

Eric waited, riveted to the rail, but nothing broke the red water. Minutes passed and the red suffused and disappeared in the wake of the vessel. Eric knew nothing of allegory, but he was depressed. He shuddered unconsciously as he changed course and headed west.

The day wore away and Strómboli and Vulcano were left to their roaring and sputtering. Eric stood, a somber and brooding gloom possessing him. Again the radio operator approached and handed him a message. He looked at it and quivered as he read:

CONDENSERS CLOGGED UNABLE
TO PROCEED S. O. S.

Eric did not wait to read the position.

Glancing at the signature he caught his breath almost painfully.

It was the *Dolphin!*

The quickest mental reaction Eric ever experienced flashed through his mind then. This was the ultimate; the acme; this was quintessential. This was more than his wildest dreams had hoped for; this was almost unbelievable; this was real triumph; this was decidedly mastery.

For he would tow the *Dolphin!* He would bring it in. He was the nearest ship. He would take her to Barcelona himself, and there, with the astounded and gnashing Charley looking on, he would say that he had brought in an international criminal.

Eric's emotions beat at his obsessed mentality with awful result. The wheelsman and second mate recoiled when they saw his face, but he scarcely saw them. He signalled to the engine room for more speed and, paying no attention to the two who watched him curiously, he returned to the bridge to scan the forward horizon.

It was not long. The *Dolphin* grew out of the sea. It grew larger and Eric beat on the rail. He shook with mad mirth. Condensers clogged! The fool. What a chief he must have had; what a staff he must have had; what a hell of a master he was. It would have been good if the damned thing had blown up and Charley with it—but no! It would be better this way, much better. *He* would bring the spawn of Jim Goodwin to ruin, himself... And so on as the *Eagle* crept closer to the stricken ship.

As he came near Eric swerved to starboard and passed. Standing on the bridge he leered at Charley as the ships came abreast. Charley, who already had recognized his rescuer, stared back for a moment, and then broke into a wide smile that brought others from the crew of the *Eagle* lined along the rail. But Eric did not smile. The leer left his face as he saw Charley, for the smile enraged him.

"Hello Eric," Charley cupped his hands as he hailed, and then, as if he wished to infuriate his maddened cousin further, laughed aloud, waved his hand, and added, "Damned nice of you."

Eric suppressed his rage in the only way he knew: action, and ignored the laughing captain of the *Dolphin*. Swiftly he worked, his own hand on the telegraph, as the mate directed the crew with lines and hawsers. The ships were finally made fast with towing cables and Eric, again at the telegraph, signalled full ahead and went out to look back at his crippled rival through his binoculars.

But the sight he saw brought oaths to his lips. He'd see, this spawn of Jim Goodwin, he'd see. He'd sing another tune when he was turned over to the Spanish police. He'd learn not to take the son of old Mark Strand so lightly. He'd learn not to insult people with that damned smile.

For Charley had been looking through binoculars too, and when he saw Eric look back he smiled and waved again.

VI

AN HOUR after Eric had picked up Charley the sun set, and it set clear. There were no clouds, no red strata across the western sky. The great flaming ball rolled through the western heavens to the rim of the sea and vanished, unattended. And as it did the barometer fell lower. It had been doing so slightly since mid-afternoon. It had reached 29.5 when Eric went down to dinner. When Eric came up from dinner it had reached 29 and hung there as it began to blow.

From stormy Biscay, bounding over the Pyrenees, the tumult came, vomited out of the Gulf of Lyons, to sweep the Tyrheenian, bound southeast. It struck at the sea and lashed it and choppy waves appeared. They rose and fell confusedly, breaking against each other, rising higher, as the rising wind scattered white flakes from their crests. It struck the two ships.

In the wake of the wind came darkness and in the wake of the darkness came rain. In southwesters and boots the crews clumped through sloshing water that shipped over the bows, to make canvas fast, to bolt bulkhead doors, as the *Eagle* and the *Dolphin*, struck abeam, began to roll.

Eric, in the wheelhouse, realizing the strain on the towing cables, signalled his intention to the *Dolphin* and changed course, heading into the storm. But the man at the helm was green. Really a boy, scarcely out of his teens, he felt his responsibility, and, as it was only his second voyage, he lost his head.

The *Eagle*, light, and headstrong with a weakling at the wheel, plunged about.

The creak of straining cables and their jolt as they perked taut when the careening ship lost her course to swing from port to starboard, sounded above the wind, and Eric heard it. He looked sharply at the compass. The *Eagle* was nine points off her course.

"Where the hell you going!" he screamed at the frightened boy, who, at the sound of the furious voice, jerked the wheel the wrong way so that, a minute later, the ship swung further afoul its course.

Eric cursed as he sprang for the wheel. His tremendous hand grasped the boy's shoulder and hurled him against the wall of the chartroom. But the boy was rash. He approached Eric timidly.

"I think, sir," he said tremulously, "that I can handle it all right now."

But Eric thought differently and the boy's action stung him. "Get out!" he bellowed above the wind, and, when the boy, confused and frightened, acted on a queer but natural impulse, hesitated and even made as if to take the wheel again, Eric acted once more.

His ugly arm swung and the heel of a huge hand caught the boy beneath the chin. The ship pitched and the boy, already off balance, was thrown backward through the door of the wheelhouse. His head struck the steel rail above the ladder and he hung, like a boxer half through the ropes, his limp body swaying with the ship.

But Eric was not interested. At the helm he held the *Eagle* firm and did not notice, a bit later, the group of seamen that appeared at the doors. For one of them, coming up to report, had witnessed Eric's blow, and rebellion, lurking within them, surged forward, as if akin to the storm. They stood, faces set, their dripping southwesters hardly more gleaming than their eyes, looking at Eric. And in their rear hovered a man with a bashed-in mouth and broken face; a man who stared with as much obsession as did Eric—the cockney.

It was the gleam of the slick and dripping southwesters that first attracted Eric's eye. He looked sharply to his right and saw men; he looked sharply to his left and saw men. And he knew from their faces what to expect. The master of his ship and at his own helm: truly, this was his real chance.

But Eric did not know how to take advantage of it; nor did he want to. He had seen emergencies like this before and had seen them handled. Yet he had not profited by them; and he did not profit by them now. His obsessed mind reacted typically.

"Well," he snarled, turning about with one hand on the wheel, "what the hell you want?"

A man stepped from a door and faced him.

"We'll damn well show ye," said the man. "From now on ye treat us decent, and if ye ever so much's lay a finger on any o' us ag'in, by God we'll kill ye, and blow yer damn packet to hell! D'ye hear?"

Eric, poor Eric, might yet have handled it, but again his reaction was consistent. A roar of rage and his great fist swung. The man was clubbed to the floor, but, as the ship, again freed from any guiding hand, veered and pounded violently, and the cables snapped with a crash, the men rushed.

Eric fought furiously. He gained the door of the chartroom and, like a cornered bear, struck back at the man who rushed him. The wheel was forgotten. The mates, a vestige of loyalty to their profession still lingering, strove weakly to quell the mutiny; the engineers were below. And with the rush of the men, the storm, proving to be only a short squall, began to abate.

But the *Eagle,* freed and again headstrong, plunged on its way. When Eric left the wheel he had jerked it violently, and the crowding men, milling forward in the small wheelhouse to get at their skipper, struck its grips, fell against them as Eric threw someone back from the door, and held it, more or less as he had left it. The ship was describing a circle.

Aided by the sea, still running strong from the squall, and by the wind which had not abated yet, it veered further around until it headed diagonally at the *Dolphin.* Nearer it came, still full speed ahead, for the engineers below did not know of the tumult above, to the *Dolphin* which floundered helplessly.

Eric still fought, but he was weakening. The mates long since had been eliminated. Two, the first and second, were down, and the third had joined the assault. Eric kicked, hit, clawed and bit. Three of his attackers lay stretched outside the wheelhouse where they had been thrown aside by their comrades. And all of them were marked, for all had come within range of those ugly arms.

But it could not last. They beat back again and again. A man dived at Eric's legs and caught them before the kick that was aimed at his head got under way. Another grabbed the skipper around the waist. Others piled on his arms and Eric went down—down under a heap of madmen bent on murder. They might have succeeded.

But they were thrown headlong by a tremendous crash. A ripping, tearing sound, as great steel plates gave way, and the *Eagle* trembled ominously. They stood, stunned and wondering, over prone Eric. A man rushed in.

"Chees!" he yelled. "We rammed de *Dolphin!*"

"God'a'mighty!" cried another. "We'll sink!"

"Grab the mates!" shouted another. "They wasn't bad guys."

Eric, dimly conscious, heard all this, and heard them leave. A battered and broken mess, he struggled painfully to rise. He passed a hand over his little eyes, dull now, and streaming with blood from cuts above them. The ship pounded crazily. Someone shouted from below that the *Dolphin* was going down by the bow. Vaguely he wondered about the *Eagle*. He tried to rise again. He paused.

Someone was standing in front of him. The shape took form through the red moisture. In the dim light he discerned a man; a wizened man with a broken face—the cockney. The bashed-in mouth snarled.

"Now, ye rawten spawn o' hell," it said. " 'Ow d'ye like this? Ho, ho, ye bloody—but 'ell—" as Eric clutched weakly at the man's legs in an effort to rise "—ye don't think Hi'll 'elp ye, does ye? Hi inet goin' t' let ye live, Hi inet. Ye hinet fit to be no marster, anywise, d' ye 'ear? Ye hinet fit to be no marster!"

Eric heard a shrill laugh; saw a glitter of steel; saw a red eruption——

The revolver spat flame twice.

VII

SOMEONE was talking,

"They all pulled off in boats, Cap'n," said a voice. "Thought she was sinkin', but she ain't. She's seaworthy all right. And say, Cap'n, I guess she's ours through salvage, now, ain't she?"

Charley Goodwin did not answer, though he knew it was so. Instead, holding Eric's head in his arms as he sat on the floor of the *Eagle's* wheelhouse, he asked:

"All our men aboard safely?"

"Yessir."

"Then pull up the rope ladder."

Eric heard, but did not comprehend. He did not know Charley was holding him. His fastly shadowing mind mulled the cockney's words, and through his crushed lips he whispered one word repeatedly. If Charley heard he gave no sign, and with his last breath Eric convulsed and whispered it:

"Master."

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

MANY letters come to this office high above New York Harbor. They come from foreign lands, from towns near by, from villages and isolated farms. One may be a message from a wanderer writing to the rise and fall of a schooner's deck somewhere off Barbados; another from a restless soul snowbound in the caribou country. One will relate the nostalgia of a rover pausing to contemplate the beauty of Fujiyama; and another convey in uncomplaining phrases the wistful good cheer of an invalid. One thing they all possess in common: the unceasing wonder of what may come with the next day, the next milestone, the newest horizon—and the imperious need of finding out.

Not altogether sad is the lot of an editor who must come to this desk each day to read that mail. It calls forth dreams, to be sure, and the remembrance of things past. Momentarily there will live again in poignant recollection other days in which desks were not concerned. But horizons exist where no physical eye beholds them, and their enchantment is to be won without the tearing up of unhappy and reluctant roots. They are not far to seek. . . .

HORIZONS

SUNDAY afternoon, and the old Bowery. Dingy doorways, crowded sidewalks, and the snow lying in the gutters like soiled and tattered lace. Gray skies, and warm, glowing windows etched with delicate traceries of frost. Long lines of men with patient, hungry eyes waiting before missions where soup and salvation are handed out in equal portions. A restaurant, steamy and full of loud voices, where beef stew is fifteen cents. Alone at a table, and too eager for companionship to be diffident, a young lad who will talk of himself. He had left home a year ago. He had been sick, beaten, robbed in that year. What might come with the next, he tried not to imagine.

Once there had been a girl he loved. Youngsters both, they had known a time of ecstasy. Each day she brought his lunch, warm in a dinner pail, down the railroad tracks to where he worked with a section gang. One noontime, walking on the eastbound tracks, and deafened by the westbound express that thundered past, the girl failed to hear the frantic whistle of the president's special coming at her back. Before his eyes she was killed, two hundred yards away. . . .

Horizons!

A taxi driver, talking through the window in a Broadway traffic halt. He had been a prize fighter. He had known grandeur, according to his lights. Days of conquest and pride, of defeat, and now of ignominy. "Well, it's all in the breaks, bud!" . . . An artist, encountered a week ago in an all-night resort, brilliantly gifted, acid of wit, learned in many things. Dead these two days, dead by his own hand in his Greenwich Village studio. The tabloid papers print the pic ture of his errant sweetheart on front pages . . . A Russian, once a colonel in the Czar's armies, aloof and erect, opening and doors before a fashionable restaurant . . An unknown, harried of eye and wkward of gait, walking in Grand Central Station at the side of a stolid, confident man. Handcuffs join them. It is from Grand Central that the train for Sing Sing departs—Sing Sing, where a little reen door leads to the death house. . . . *Horizons!*

ON THE HIGH SEAS

ONE gentle reader writes me from a deck chair on the *S. S. Sierra*, bound for Hawaii. Most willingly I admit that the romance she wishes to onvey lost nothing in transit. Where in awaii or the South Seas or the Far East, I wonder, will she read this *Meeting Place?*

I have just read through the *Meeting Place* January Everybody's, and when I read what ou said about faraway places and the thrill at they gave you, why it seemed as though, entally, we were shaking hands across several ousand miles of space, and I just could not sist writing a line or two. And I hope this tter carries some of this golden sunset-breeze you, and the sound of the sea swishing by the es as the boat rolls through a heavy swell, d the gay banter of the passengers who are ting out on deck. They weren't so jolly a uple of days ago because we were tossing and ching through a ninety mile gale. And, too, e odor of dinner drifting out and mingling ith the salt spray, and a glimpse of a sailor aying a ukulele while he taps out the time ith his foot, and a passenger unable to keep m jigging—but a sudden lurch of the boat nds him sliding down the deck. Another ilor is talking of Pago Pago (he calls it Pango ngo) and tomorrow morning Diamond Head l be off our starboard bow. Yes, I'm getting a ill out of dreams come true, Editor.

The dinner gong! So aloha!

Dora Folsom Martin.

ANOTHER COUNTY HEARD FROM

MANY nice things are said about the magazine, many more, indeed, than a proper editorial odestly can permit to appear here. The o of letters below are quite representae. Mr. Evans will doubtless be glad to ow that a novelette by Hugh Pendexis coming in Everybody's soon.

I take this opportunity to congratulate you on the excellent numbers of your magazine that you are now turning out.

The magazine is quite attractive in appearance and the stories are particularly good. The class of Western stories that you are publishing certainly tops all others. I am very glad to see Hugh Pendexter writing for you. I have never found one of his stories dull yet. His *The Roaring Towns* comes up to his usual good efforts.

W. H. Evans,
Buffalo, N. Y.

The writer of the next letter speaks for a vast number of readers, I am sure. Most of us are very human in our reluctance to write a perfect stranger about our enthusiasms. But actually a strong tie of friendship already exists between us. The only difference is that my personal enthusiasms began much earlier, when the stories arrived in manuscript.

Thank you, Miss Warner, for so cordial a greeting!

In the ten years I have been a reader of Everybody's there has been many a story so good that on finishing it I would declare, "I'm going to write to the Editor and tell him how much I enjoyed that story!" But somehow I just usually put it off!

This time, though, I've just got to write—the whole February issue is so good!

Honestly, I enjoyed everything in it except two short stories that don't happen to be my type—which does *not* mean a kick, for if Everybody's is to live up to its name it must, of course, have stories for every taste.

The ones I particularly enjoyed reading this time were: the three novelettes (especially *Between the Tides*); *The Desert Moon Mystery* (the ending of which I never even suspected); *The Fighting of Giants; Jingle Smidt's Nugget Gold;* and *Ordeal.*

Truly, I never saw so many good things packed into one issue of any magaine before! Here's hoping for more numbers like the February one! Best wishes, from

Mary Logan Warner,
Cecilia, Kentucky.

The following letter gives me chance to repeat a bit of good news. Captain Dingle is giving us another splendid romance of the sea. It will be ready for some future issue, not so far off that I cannot tell you to be on the lookout for it.

Because of your courtesy in answering my note of solution of *The Desert Moon Mystery*, I am writing to extend congratulations on the excellent periodical you direct in the new Everybody's.

Prior to the change in subject matter, the magazine was, to say the kindest thing, nondescript. The stories you are giving your readers now are, I think, the very best in their class. And they are of a highly interesting and meaty class, too.

After all the months that have elapsed since its final installment appeared, I find myself recalling bits of the vividly portrayed action of Dingle's *Flying Kestrel*. Conrad cannot more ably describe a storm at sea, whatever else may undoubtedly be applauded in that Pole.

Ared White knows his *guerre* groceries, and is highly articulate in passing them on to his customers. Thomas Thursday, well—tell the truth, sir—is he Witwer? If he is not, he has certainly succeeded in out-Witwering the prolific "H. C." Though I daresay I betray a classic ignorance in questioning the existence and high literary status of Mr. Thursday. Pray, do not mention it to him; for I have artistic affiliations and have reason to know how easily they of the temperamental ilk are precipitated from the loftiest spiritual mountaintops to a depression as deep as a rendezvous with Death.

Whitfield's air stories are written by a man who can write "flying" as satisfactorily as Lindbergh can do the actual bird stuff.

And, reverting to *The Desert Moon Mystery*, it was chuckful of literary "It." It is the first story of the kind that has impressed me with the so-seldom-encountered quality of plausibility. The machinery of its making is not sticking out all over it to murder the illusion of this-really-happened so necessary to the peace of mind of the avid reader. Has the author written other books?

With sincerity of one who reads a lot, I wish you all the happiness, personal and editorial, that a fellow named Hayes from the County Limerick would naturally wish for a good gentleman named Corcoran from any county in the world. *John D. Hayes,*
New York.

Sorry, Mr. Hayes—my county was called Luzerne, and is to be found on the map of Pennsylvania. But the sentiments are cordially appreciated!

THE TOUGHEST BORDER TOWN

RAOUL F. WHITFIELD'S next story is in the May issue, but I found this letter of his too interesting to keep till then. He makes a statement some of you may question—that Tia Juana is "still the toughest border town." I shall not enter into the argument, but what have you old-timers to say about it? Here's the letter:

A few lines about Tia Juana. A friend told me he'd heard she'd become a great visiting place for "middle-western ladies and their kids." So, though I've known the town pretty well, I decided to take a hurried look. Bad storm, going down. High wind. Lots of mud at the Port. Got through, drove the half mile or so southward past the race track to the town. About four-thirty. Almost dark. No power, no street lights, because of the storm. Headed for the Foreign Club. Jammed with humans, the most assorted and worst looking bunch I've ever seen. Candles on the gambling tables. Everything wide open. Counted seven types of games, roulette and "twenty-one" most in evidence. Very few sober. One knifing over near the bar, while I played a few silver dollars on the red. The place was my idea of a tough spot. Stuck around for almost an hour. Wanted a bite to eat.

Black outside. Not a street light. Mud everywhere, even on the two paved streets. Avinada filled with dance-hall girls, yelling and grabbing at you. Gambling at every bar, and every shack a bar. Tried for a sandwich at the Old San Francisco, but a fight and flying bottles kept me out of the place. Hit the Tunnel and had a piece of rye bread, a couple of days stale, and a fizz. Tinny pianos rattling, humans yelling everywhere. Plenty of Mexicans about. And they act nasty. Natural disposition. Border closes at six. Quarter of six. Decided to get back to the car. Circled around, got off the main street. Mex lying in the gutter, pretty badly cut up. No one paid any attention to him, n seemed to see him. Got a look, and decided that if he were broke he'd be all right in the morning. Streets too dark for fooling around. Got loose from some lady who said she was "little Lottie—an' good" and reached the car. Long line coming out. Bottles breaking everywhere. Mex inspection slow, pretty thorough. Got across line and pulled off to the side, letting the speedy boys drive wild to the northward. Felt a lot better away from Tia. Same old rolling hills, mesquite and mud. Same old shacks. I didn't see the middle-western ladies—or their kids. But I saw enough to convince me that Tia Juana doesn't change much. She's still the U. S. A.'s toughest border town. Juarez, Agua Prieta, Mexicali and the others look saintly compared to her.

With the power off she looked like a nice little corner of hell. Ought to be good for a story background—no lights, and the candles on bars and gambling tables. Anyway, just wanted you to know that she hasn't reformed. She's one of those places where about anything can happen—and usually does.

Raoul F. Whitfield,

TO THE LADIES

AT THE time he sent me the manuscript for his novelette in this issue, RAYMOND S. SPEARS offered a word of apology. He felt that one feature of it might court criticism. Here is what he said:

I've emphasized perhaps too much the feminine background of the hero's activities. At the same time I've pretty definitely made up my mind that there were women, bad and good, in all the great moral crises of East or West. Watching group activities from those of banditry to political fantasies I've seen a stenographer the actual brains of one organization and a renegade school teacher the "life" of

bunch. So I've described two women of
border town among the other characters.

At the time, I suspended judgment until
got around to read the story. But im-
diately I had done so, a reply went to
in complete vindication. From my
perience with such matters, it seems
t he is quite right. Any tale which at-
mpts a realistic picture of the roaring
ces on whatever frontier would have to
pretty far before it over-emphasized
woman element.

Remember *Nancy Prowse?* She was in
PTAIN DINGLE's *Flying Kestrel*, which
serially in these pages a year ago.
tainly one would look last of all in a
pper ship story for an outstanding wo-
character. Yet *Nancy Prouse* had a
t important share in that tale. With-
t her, it would never have been written.
d what a yarn it was!

It seems to me that this is a good
nce for you to speak up and tell us
t you think about EVERYBODY's.
re is a definite type of story that
kes itself right at home between these
ers. In it you may find a woman play-
an important part. You may not find
at all. The story was originally
ght because it was a good story, and
no other reason. However, some ex-
lent yarns have come my way which
ld be unacceptable in other magazines
cause of a shade more than usual of
t is called "woman interest." They
e good stories. I bought them. You
e read them.

And now I'd like to know what you
k of them.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

ANOTHER newcomer is welcomed to the magazine in this issue. JIM FELLOM, to be sure, is an old d, but this is his first appearance here. *Once on Mohave* is an unusual Western story, and an excellent one. Let's hope he has more of them on the way . . . Another yarn I present with a certain amount of pride is ARED WHITE's tale of the Philippines. Those of you who have served in the ranks will know the significance of that phrase *To the Colors* for an old army man. No, I'm not one. The word "old" debars me. But for all of us, whatever our latter day opinions of war and the Army, there remains the memory of one moment of pride and beauty that was thrilling beyond price. To the Colors! . . . Stories of Africa are curiously rare. Really good ones, that is. *Wonder Dokters of the Zambezi* by E. VAN LIER RIBBINK is one of those rare yarns. I feel that the note of authenticity which runs through it is a delight. Ribbink, as his name would indicate, is of Boer extraction. He knows South Africa. . . . I would prefer here to sit down and discuss stories which you have before you, but I must say something about the contents of the May magazine. It has a line-up of old EVERYBODY's writers, of whom I really need say nothing, and several brand new ones. HULBERT FOOTNER's novelette, *North of Nowhere*, is as honest and thrilling a story as I've ever seen come out of the great wilds far up yonder. *Guns Across the Table* is PARKER KERBY's first published story. It will appear accompanied by my keen enthusiasm for a tale at once so different and so good. . . . But read the good news of next month on the next page. And on the 20th, drop by your news stand and pick up a copy of as entertaining a magazine as you ever read . . . I am about to borrow a phrase from one of this month's correspondents. It's as expressive a leave-taking as I know. So . . . *The dinner gong! Aloha!*

WILLIAM CORCORAN.

THE NEWS OF NEXT MONT

Tales of Daring and Danger
From the Far Corners of the Earth

NORTH OF NOWHERE

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Up along lonely trails and swift white rivers, ever northward to a post seven hundred miles from civilization—where two strong men fight for survival and the love of a woman.

GOLD BARS

By ARED WHITE

France and the way of the Army—a tale of high humor, less of war than of the men, gallant and otherwise, who waged it.

COMMAND

By FRANK H. SHAW

The China Sea, a hold full of cranky coolies, a hurricane rushing over the horizon—and a captain bred to the tradition of command.

and

SEVEN FINE SHORT STORIES

Among them "The Light on Little Hope," a tale of the bleak north coast by Captain Dingle; "Rio Red," a different flying yarn by Raoul F. Whitfield; "The Desert Bell," a romance of the arid wastes by Ernest Douglas—and a long instalment of "The Secret Lagoon," by Basil Carey.